

PREPARING EDUCATORS TO INVOLVE FAMILIES

From Theory to Practice

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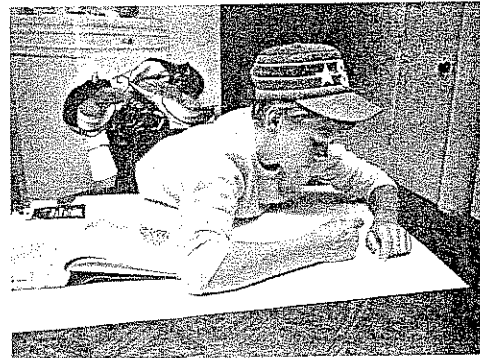
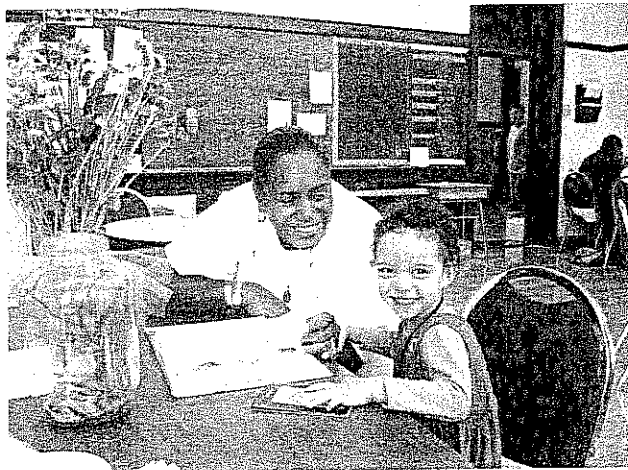
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Section 2

The Mesosystem

In Section 1 of this volume, we presented theoretical lenses and teaching cases for which microsystemic processes were most salient. In this section, we focus on the **mesosystem**, which in ecological systems theory refers to the relationships and interactions among the immediate contexts in which child development occurs. These interactions can occur at multiple levels, such as between and among settings (e.g., the school and the afterschool program), or between and among the individuals inhabiting those settings (such as the teacher and the afterschool program director). Examples of the types of interactions occurring in the mesosystem include the effects of children's experiences within the family context on their experiences at school (and vice versa) or the effects of neighborhood characteristics on family functioning.

Ecological systems theory defines the mesosystem as comprising "the linkages and settings containing the developing person," or "a system of microsystems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 227). Microsystems are those contexts that contain the developing person (in the case of this volume, the focal child), many of which can overlap. For example, a child's friendship and peer networks at home and at school often overlap, because many children attend school in their neighborhoods. This is an example of linkages among several microsystems—peers, neighborhood, and school—all of which contain the developing child on an almost daily basis. A number of different processes can emerge from these linkages and may have significant influences on the child's development. For example, a child may be drawn to a different peer group at school than at home but nonetheless may feel obligated to "hang out" with the neighborhood kids at lunch time. Tensions such as this are likely to influence the child's interactions in each of these settings.

Section 2 contains two theoretical lenses and four teaching cases that effectively illustrate how processes in the mesosystem can relate to children's development. First, Pamela Davis-Kean and Jacquelynne Eccles present a model of Social Executive Functioning that draws heavily upon and extends

ecological systems theory. The social executive functioning model represents children's development as being dependent on the effectiveness of parents and other significant adults in coordinating the connections among children's microsystems. That is, parents or primary caregivers are the principal conduits through which children receive information about the world and how it operates, and about what their roles in the world might be. Moreover, parents and caregivers use that information in guiding their children's experiences. In this way, the family acts as an executive functionary, or a body that manages information processing and decision-making on behalf of the developing child. The ultimate goal is for children to develop into well-functioning adults who will themselves become executive functionaries for both their own and others' children's lives.

The social executive functioning model is essentially a mesosystem model, as one of its critical tenets is that executive functionaries must work closely together to ensure children's optimal development. Specifically, the connection and coordination among microsystems can support or inhibit the flow of information about children, the management of their learning opportunities, and the development of their executive functioning skills. The model asserts that the relative influence of one executive functionary—such as the school—is dependent on the executive functioning of another, such as the family. For example, to the extent that the family is an efficient manager of information and experiences for the child, less is required of the school in its capacity as an executive functionary.

The executive functioning model can provide a useful framework for understanding and analyzing the cases in this volume. In this section, we have included four particular cases because of their emphasis on the connections between family, school, and community—or the mesosystem. In "Defining 'Fine': Communicating Academic Progress to Parents," we meet first-grader Nathan, whose teacher has recommended that he attend summer school to maintain his reading progress. In this way, Nathan's teacher has acted as an executive functionary, using and analyzing information about Nathan's abilities and making decisions about how to enhance his progress, based on the information she has obtained. Nathan's mother, however, is surprised by the recommendation, as his teacher has communicated all along that he was performing at grade level in reading. Although both Nathan's mother and his teacher are acting as executive functionaries, managing information and organizing his experiences pertaining to his academic progress, problems occur because of the breakdown in communication between the microsystems of school and family. As a result, both systems continue to work at full capacity as executive functionaries, but not necessarily in concert. Similar issues arise in "Bilingual Voices and Parent Classroom Choices," where a mother, teacher, and school principal have different notions about whether bilingual placement would be best for first-grader Nina Campos.

The second lens in this section, "How Do Communities Support Family Involvement? An Exploratory Framework," by Heather Weiss and M. Elena Lopez addresses the role of community institutions in facilitating greater continuity across children's contexts. The authors' definition of community is broad, encompassing socially interdependent groups of people ranging from neighborhoods to racial and cultural groups. Their bottom line is that communities are self-defined, provide their members with a sense of belonging, and are committed to upholding a set of practices, beliefs, and values shared among them.

Community institutions can provide resources that facilitate the connections between children's families and their schools. For example, many contemporary afterschool programs transport children from their schools and provide homework supervision and assistance. These resources are particularly beneficial to families who don't have flexible work schedules, have multiple obligations at home or are not confident about their own capacity for helping their children with homework.

In the case, "Staying on a Path Toward College," we are introduced to Paulo, a sixth-grade, Mexican-American youth whose working-class parents have aspirations that he will take "the good path" in life, and ultimately graduate from college and get a well-paying job. As his parents worry that he is slipping from the path, they enlist assistance from members of their community. Paulo's godmother's son, who is an alumnus of a community college outreach program for low-income youth, helps him with homework and encourages him to apply for the program. The director of the program, Rachel Marquez, is committed to the program's mission of creating networks of youth who share the goal of going to college. In Paulo's case, resources from both community institutions (the college, the outreach program) and individual members of his and his family's cultural community (his godmother and her son) provide bridges across Paulo's worlds of family and school. Similarly, in "Lunchtime at Sunnydale Elementary School," grandmother Beatriz Hinojisa relies on members of her cultural community to give voice to her growing concerns about her granddaughters' safety at school.

As with the theories in Section I, we encourage readers to consider the theoretical approaches in this section for other cases, aside from the cases included here. The point of this section is to illustrate the ways in which theory regarding properties of mesosystems can be applied to real-life dilemmas related to family educational involvement. Children's development occurs at home, at school, in neighborhoods, and in community institutions, all of which are interdependent contexts in many ways. What happens at home affects a child's experiences at school; what happens at school can affect a child's peer relationships outside of school; and so on. Readers are encouraged to explore the interrelationships among children's many microsystem contexts when trying to understand the dynamic underpinnings of their individual situations.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Mesosystem

The theoretical perspectives included in this chapter focus most centrally on the linkages across children's developmental contexts, or across their microsystems. Hence, these perspectives are useful illustrations of processes occurring at the level of the mesosystem in children's ecology. Specifically, Pamela Davis-Kean and Jacquelynne Eccles present a model that positions parents and caregivers as executive functionaries in children's lives, managing the flow of information regarding the target children's development and using that information to organize those children's experiences. Importantly, the social executive functioning model works at the levels of both individuals and institutions, and the effectiveness of executive functionaries is largely dependent on the coordination of information flow among and between them.

Heather Weiss and M. Elena Lopez provide an empirically supported theoretical framework for understanding how communities and the institutions within them can support the links between families and schools. Although the community microsystem is emphasized in this perspective, it represents a mesosystem approach in that it focuses on the role of the community in connecting other systems. The authors define community broadly, describing it as being anchored in feelings of belonging and common objectives among its members.

We encourage readers to consider real-life situations to which these theoretical perspectives might be applicable. As examples of such applications, we have clustered the perspectives in this section with four teaching cases in the next chapter. Each of these teaching cases describes families' experiences in multiple contexts—home, school, neighborhood, cultural group—and how they are interconnected. Thus, the theories contained in this chapter can be readily applied to each of the cases.

Social Executive Functioning

by Pamela Davis-Kean
and Jacquelynne S. Eccles

Research suggests that home-school relationships that involve high levels of effective coordination and communication promote school success for children (Comer, 1980; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1990). Yet research also indicates that such coordination and communication among parents and teachers is rare and, if it does occur, is based on specific characteristics of parents, teachers, and schools (e.g., parents' backgrounds, teacher beliefs, and principal leadership; Comer & Haynes, 1991; Epstein, 1990; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In this piece we introduce the *social executive functioning model*, which highlights how some schools and families jointly manage the healthy development of children through the effective coordination and communication of information and resources.

The social executive functioning model draws on both cognitive psychology, which focuses on the individual's ability to perceive, process, and produce information, and systems theory, which stresses the dynamic and complex relationships among individuals, institutions, and their various contexts. Within the individual, executive functioning is a cognitive process that occurs as people manage, evaluate, and respond to information and resources in their environments (Borkowski & Burke, 1996; Fletcher, 1996). We believe executive functioning can also occur at the group (or systems) level, as schools and other institutions manage and organize information coming into and flowing out of their organizations (Davis-Kean & Eccles, 2002).

To function effectively, individuals and systems must learn how to manage and coordinate the flow of information and to organize and carry out necessary tasks. At the individual level, children learn this through interacting with their physical and social environments. They take in and process information, leading to cognitive and social learning (Flavell, 1999). This flow of information occurs in a rich set of social contexts, and there are multiple avenues through which information and resources reach each child. Early in life this information is generally managed by parents or parental figures through both their daily practices and the decisions they make concerning the types of information and resources the child receives (Eccles, 1992; Fursternberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). As the child matures, teachers, religious figures, relatives, peer groups, and other significant people come to influence the informational flow and resources available to the child. Thus, over the years of childhood and adolescence, multiple significant others are engaged in managing the information and resources available to both inform children about their world and shape their growing knowledge and skill repertoire.

Moving beyond the individual, the concept of executive functioning can also help us think about how families (and other institutions such as schools) manage the healthy development of children. Just as individuals must process information and act on it to accomplish tasks, so must families and other institutions. Family management theorists, for example, propose that families' daily practices, particularly their managerial activities, are important influences on children's social and cognitive development (Furstenberg et al., 1999). These theorists argue that families orchestrate their children's daily lives in ways that provide them with opportunities and resources and protect them from risks and dangers.

Institutions and individuals beyond the family sphere (e.g., schools, communities, and teachers) also manage children's daily lives in ways that are intended to promote their healthy development. We describe the managerial and organizational process that occurs in systems (e.g., social institutions such as families, schools, and neighborhoods) as **socially organized executive functioning** and refer to the systems and individuals doing this work as **executive functionaries**. For example, schools act as children's executive functionaries when they institute schedules to organize children's time and activities. Similarly, families act as executive functionaries when they establish procedures for managing the tasks related to childrearing, such as mealtime, getting ready for school, afterschool activities, doing homework, and bedtime. Ideally, with the help of important individuals and institutions, children will eventually learn to perform these managerial and organizational tasks for themselves and ultimately become self-regulated socially connected adults.

Our model, derived in part from Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998) nested context model, depicts the role of executive functionaries in children's daily lives (see Figure 3.1). What is not depicted is the critical importance of these executive functionaries working closely together. Individuals and institutions can only be effective executive functionaries for children when they have sufficient and appropriate ways to take in, evaluate, and share information and resources with each other. Our model shows that individuals and institutions interact with and affect each other.

The model shows how some individuals and institutions (e.g., parents, schools) are close to children, while others (e.g., school board, mayor) may be more distant. However, closer elements are not necessarily more influential than more distant ones. Effective functioning is a dynamic property of the entire system. For example, the community context may not have a strong influence on one child if her family and school are effective executive functionaries on her behalf. By contrast, the community contexts may have a stronger influence on another child if his family and school are less effective in the area of executive functioning. Similarly, when a community and school have few resources, the family system will have more demands placed on its executive functioning as it attempts to provide the child with greater opportunities and minimize risks.

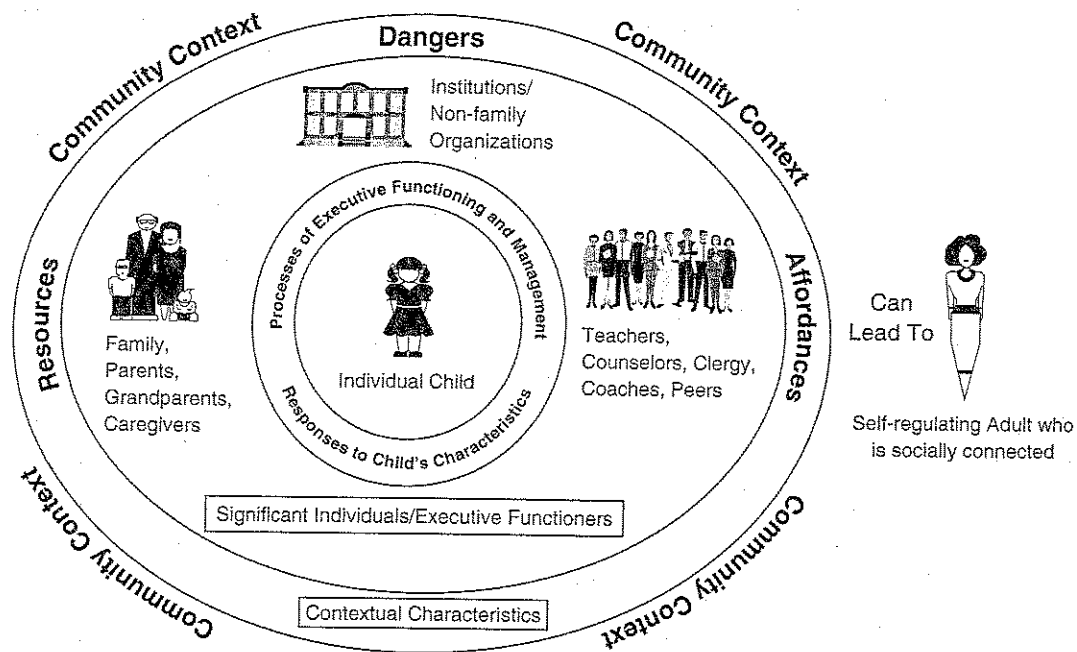


Figure 3.1 Social Executive Functioning Model

Note: The spheres are dynamically interacting such that contexts are affecting and being affected by executive functioners and the individual child.

For example, in poor communities, where there are few organized out-of-school activities and where schools are underfunded, parents must work hard to locate appropriate and safe activities for their children. The difficulty of this task may be even more challenging because the family itself also has limited resources. Thus, there is a dynamic interaction between the elements of this model, which produces a unique configuration of influence and outcomes.

At the heart of this model is *the individual child*, who receives resources and processes information from his or her world. Children bring to the situation their own cognitive abilities, temperament, and other individual characteristics. This is where the connection is made between the socially organized executive functionaries and children's internal executive functioning. As they mature, children must gradually incorporate information, strategies, and resources from their environments. For example, in order for children to have good social skills and learn to be self-regulated, parents or significant adults in their lives must explain what skills are needed for positive interactions and self-control. Children must then process, incorporate, and apply this information in an appropriate manner.

The next sphere in the model refers to *significant individuals and institutions*. These are the groups most likely to interact directly with and influence children. These groups manage information coming in from the other spheres

and adjust them in response to children's characteristics. In the early years of life, management and resources generally flow through *parents or primary caregivers*. These caregivers provide important physical (e.g., food, transportation, health care), psychosocial (e.g., social and emotional support and skills, adaptability) and internal (e.g., self-discipline, self-awareness, and values) resources to children.

When children begin attending daycare or school, some executive functioning shifts to these new arenas. Like parents and other primary caregivers, daycare centers and schools, as well as the teachers working in them, provide children with physical and psychosocial resources. For teachers in these settings to be effective executive functionaries for children, they must coordinate their activities with children's primary caregivers. Without this connection, the two parties will not have the information they need to effectively manage children's lives and promote their well-being.

Recent calls for greater collaboration between school and families indicate a growing awareness that children's executive functionaries must have better coordination with each other. For this collaboration to occur, however, the two systems must have access to the same information and must have shared goals against which each system can evaluate progress and identify potential problems.

As children mature, more individuals (e.g., peers, counselors, religious leaders, coaches) may act as executive functionaries on their behalf. Similarly, executive functioning must occur in a greater number of social institutions (e.g., community programs, Head Start, juvenile court). In addition, children and their executive functionaries must manage more opportunities and dangers. In many cases, the dangers become increasingly risky, and the opportunities become more difficult to manage. As these demands increase, stronger coordination among the executive functionaries is needed. Unfortunately, such coordination becomes difficult as children move into middle childhood. This is because children of this age must navigate contextual systems that tend to be independent of and disconnected from each other.

Community contexts, such as neighborhoods, surrounding communities' characteristics, and shared cultural contexts, represent the outermost sphere. These are contexts that influence children indirectly through the executive functionaries. These contexts interact with the primary caregivers' own demographics and put certain constraints on what resources they can draw on to help them manage. Community contexts vary in the extent to which children's primary caregivers must intervene and manage their children's experiences. When primary caregivers agree with the norms and values of the community and trust their neighbors to help them raise their children, their executive functioning for children is more easily distributed among and shared with other community members. By contrast, when primary caregivers feel their neighborhood is not

safe for their children, they may have to exert considerable energy as executive functionaries to protect them.

When executive functionaries manage resources and information well for the child, the end result is an adult who has good self-regulation skills and who is well integrated into the community. When there is a failure in the executive functioning system, this goal is more difficult to achieve. Thus, problems with children's executive functioning can be similar to a cognitive disability. For example, when a primary caregiver cannot effectively model self-regulation for the child, the child is less likely to learn this important skill. Sometimes, however, resources may be unavailable in one social context (such as the family), but are provided in another (such as the school). For example, providing free/reduced lunch programs, helping children develop emotional self-regulation, and teaching children important social skills are school resources that can augment the family's economic, information, and social-emotional resources. Individuals at school can also connect families and children with other organizations, such as community outreach programs, that may provide this assistance. Conversely, schools may also receive resources and information from families. For example, if parents feel the schools are not adequately teaching their children, they may become more involved in teaching at home, or may obtain tutoring from other institutions. Hence, a certain amount of compensation can and should occur between the executive functionaries to aid in the development of a self-regulated adult. Such compensation is likely to work best when the various systems are working together on behalf of the child.

Conclusion

The social executive functioning model demonstrates how adults inside and outside the home can work together to promote healthy progress for children. Because children spend many of their hours outside the home in educational settings, teachers, coaches, and other school personnel can make important contributions to children's positive development. The children develop not only their academic skills in these settings, but also their social skills through dealing with peers and adults. Academic and social skills are equally valuable talents to foster, and predict success in adulthood. Thus, it is important that avenues are created whereby communication, management of information, and coordination are the tools to foster both the social and academic talents of children.

Implications for Educators

The social executive functioning model has implications for teachers' and schools' interactions with families. In particular, teachers and other school

personnel must begin with the assumption that parents can and want to be effective influences in their children's education. Inherent in the social executive functioning model is the notion that one way to be effective is to improve and maximize the connections between children's homes and classrooms.

Reduce barriers to parents' effective family participation. Parents and families can be dissuaded from participating and communicating with schools for many reasons. Logistical, cultural, and informational barriers should be identified and strategies put in place to reduce them. Teachers and schools can solicit feedback from parents on what barriers they face. Identifying and involving parent leaders who share the same cultural or linguistic background as other families can facilitate this process.

Cultivate schools and classrooms that welcome and integrate families. Schools must cultivate an environment in which parents and families are welcomed and integrated into the school community. Providing a space inside the school for parents to gather with each other, meet with school personnel, and access information and resources sends a strong message that parents are a valued constituency and welcomed visitors at the school.

Establish and utilize effective systems of communication between home and school. On a systems level, school administrators and other personnel should ensure that they have effective communications systems in place to convey and receive important child and family information. Updated telephone systems and other technologies, language translation services, and contact persons who can orient parents to the school system and its practices provide necessary infrastructure for the effective transmission of information between schools and families.

Help children and families improve executive functioning skills. This model suggests that teachers should attend to how well information flows (or is blocked) between families and their school and/or classroom, and how that information is managed. When feasible, teachers can develop classroom strategies that optimize communication and collaboration between themselves and families. For example, teachers can provide parents with suggestions and tips about how to help children plan, organize, and complete homework assignments. These suggestions should be matched to parents' educational and linguistic backgrounds.

Help families navigate school-related tasks and activities. Some parents may need help understanding basic educational practices in contemporary U.S. schools, such as those who attended school in other countries. Teachers and schools should not take it for granted that parents will be able to help their

children complete homework assignments and navigate course requirements that will prepare them for college. Instead, teachers and other school personnel may need to provide some parents with resources and information that will allow them to effectively guide their children through the education system.

Community Support for Family Involvement in Children's Learning

by Heather B. Weiss and M. Elena Lopez

Ecological theory views the neighborhood as an important context for children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). As mentioned in the introduction to Section 2, children's development is influenced by children's immediate contexts (microsystems such as home, school, and community) and the relationships among these contexts (the mesosystems).

The relationship of neighborhood circumstances to children's development has long been of interest to developmental researchers. In general, neighborhood influences on child and youth outcomes (ages 11–16) tend to be modest, and the processes by which they occur through family management strategies are still not well understood. For example, one study found little evidence to indicate that neighborhood circumstances improve adolescent outcomes as a result of family management practices, which refer to how parents react to the world outside the home, either by monitoring youth activities or linking youth to resources, such as neighborhood programs (Ran-Kim, Chan, Settersten, & Teitler, 1999). Other studies, however, suggest that neighborhoods affect youth because neighborhood features influence parent perceptions and monitoring activities. Parent perception of neighborhood problems is related to regulation of children's activities, which, in turn, is associated with children's increased social competence (O'Neil, Parke, & McDowell, 2001). Parent perceptions of neighborhood as a community—for example, how closely knit the neighborhood is and how likely neighbors will help in time of trouble—alter parenting practices. Neighborhoods with a greater sense of community encourage more intensive parental monitoring, which in turn is associated with better youth outcomes (Rankin & Quane, 2002).

Children and youth grow up in multiple contexts: home, school, neighborhood, and friendship groups. Only recently has there been an attempt to understand the relative importance of each context as well as the joint influence of all four contexts for child and youth development. The better the quality of each of these contexts, the better the outcomes for them; however, the joint effect of all

four contexts matters most for child and youth development (Cook, Herman, Phillips, & Settersten, 2002). Strengthening all of these contexts to promote positive development holds the best promise for child and youth success now and in the future.

This theoretical lens focuses specifically on how neighborhood and community contexts can support families and the home context, especially in relation to children's school success. Although much has been written about school practices to involve parents in their children's learning, we know less about how such involvement is promoted by the community and, in particular, by parents' social networks and organizations other than the school. Community refers to "a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. 333). It includes people who typically develop a sense of belonging by virtue of geographic location such as neighborhoods, purposive activity such as the workplace, or cultural affinity such as language, ethnicity, and religion. Community support for family involvement consists of the informal processes and formal organizations that provide the resources and opportunities for families to become involved in children's learning and development. This article highlights in particular "community bridging strategies" available to parents and the expansion of family involvement roles through community organizations.

Community Bridging Strategies

Low-income families often seek to overcome negative neighborhood conditions that threaten their children's lives through community bridging strategies that promote youth development (Jarrett, 1999, 2000). Community bridging strategies refer to a complex set of parent actions that link children and youth with "mainstream opportunities and institutions" (Jarrett, 1999, p. 46). They include monitoring children's time, space, and friendships, seeking local and extra-local resources, and using in-home learning strategies.

Communities as networks of people provide a context for parents to create bridging strategies. As parents develop informal networks in the community, they expose their children to people who can enrich a child's developmental experiences. In middle childhood, children develop the ability to understand different perspectives and behaviors and their consequences for interacting with others (Eccles, 1999). A study of Boston neighborhoods showed that when parents had strong neighborhood ties that extended beyond the family, children's social behaviors and school performance were better. One explanation for this finding is that children who were exposed to more heterogeneous social networks had more opportunities to spend time with other

adults in socially and cognitively stimulating activities (Marshall, Noonan, McCartney, Marx, & Keefe, 2001).

Community-based employment can provide opportunities for low-income parents to gain access to resources that enhance their child's learning. In a study of low-income mothers' involvement in their elementary school children's education, Weiss and colleagues describe how mothers used the workplace to call teachers by phone and access resources such as computers, educational advice from colleagues or employers, and tutoring or homework help for children (Weiss et al., 2003). Their children also came to the workplace after school to do homework. The study shows that full-time working parents are less involved at the school than part-time working mothers, but that the workplace provides a space other than the home or school in which involvement can occur. Mothers who used these workplace opportunities exemplify the community bridging strategies that direct their children toward new resources or those that are not available in the home.

A growing number of communities provide afterschool programs for children that not only serve working parents by providing safe places for children to engage in activities, but also engage families in the programming. Some parents ensure quality services by participating in surveys and focus groups, although a core group of parents takes on leadership and governance roles. Parents may also participate in children's activities, help raise funds, and find paid positions as coordinators and tutors in these programs (Blank, 2001; Caspe, Traub, & Little, 2002). Through afterschool programs, they monitor their children's activities and use these programs as bridging strategies to expose children to new learning environments.

As children grow into early adolescence, their relationships with parents change. Although children seek to distance themselves from their parents in some aspects of their lives, they also want to develop close relationships with nonfamilial adults (Eccles, 1999). Afterschool programs complement and support parent roles by offering adult guidance for children. In some situations, they function as cultural brokers among immigrant families and mainstream institutions and provide resources beyond what families and schools offer, such as counsel and assistance for college preparation. The Bridging Multiple Worlds model guides university-community partnerships designed to increase access to college among low-income, ethnic minority, and immigrant youth. The model has been used extensively to help Latino youth in California feel confident and safe in their neighborhoods, learn alternatives to violence, and gain bicultural skills needed to succeed in school. Program staff members provide cultural continuity by reinforcing Latino families' beliefs that success in life is measured in both moral and academic terms. Staff also offer youth a view of life opportunities through resources of mainstream institutions, including schools, colleges, and banks (Cooper, Chavira, Mikolyski, & Dominguez, 2004).

Expanded Family Involvement Roles

Community organizations act as change agents by providing the resources, occasions, and supports for parents to take proactive roles in their children's learning, and more broadly, in public education. Community organizations refer to public service agencies, faith-based organizations, and an array of non-profit entities that serve the community. Although schools are the most important institutions for directly engaging families in their children's education, many of them lack the capacity to provide low-income and immigrant parents with the level of support they need to become engaged in their children's learning. In different parts of the country, community organizations are fulfilling this function. They provide a forum or space for parents and community members to deliberate on educational issues; they expand parent roles as learners, teachers, advocates, and leaders; and they organize parents and community members to use their collective power to effect school change.

Ethnic associations, for example, provide a forum in which immigrant parents can communicate in their native languages about their aspirations and frustrations and construct the goals they have for their children. Among various Southeast Asian groups, the associations connect the school and the community by facilitating meetings among parents, teachers, and community leaders (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1997). These convening activities familiarize school personnel with the culture of students and families and may help them to better align school practices with parental wishes and needs. They also convey to parents, in whose cultures the separation of school and home is the norm, that their participation in schools is important.

As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, parents may experience social, psychological, informational, and practical challenges that limit their involvement in children's education. In addition, family involvement practices tend to reflect school priorities and terms of parent participation. In recent years, some community organizations have worked directly with families to expand their roles in schools and to create a more equitable role for parents in shaping their involvement. Although these organizations differ on many important characteristics, they tend to adopt a similar philosophy, namely one that seeks to give parents the opportunity not only to engage in their children's learning and development, but also to influence schools and to become resources for other parents, teachers, and students.

The Jane Addams School for Democracy, a community-based initiative of higher education institutions and a neighborhood service center in Saint Paul, Minnesota, offers a good example of expanding the educational roles of a diverse group of Hmong and Latino parents. By joining the school's study circles, parents are *learners* who study to gain citizenship and improve their English skills. Through their interactions with community members of various

ethnicities, and with professionals and students, parents also learn to apply the principles of democracy as they plan and carry out the school's activities. Furthermore, their involvement with the school opens new opportunities, such as access to the Community Education Program, sponsored by the St. Paul public school district. Through this program Hmong and Latino parents become *teachers* and offer courses in cooking and reading and writing in their native language. Building on the opportunities for dialogue and newly formed networks of relationships, parents have also become *leaders* in initiating school change. A small group of core parents, with the assistance of the Jane Addams School, organized a series of meetings to train other parents about the school system and work on common concerns. Beyond giving input at meetings, parents seek to influence school actions. One of their concerns is the way schools communicate academic progress, particularly the lack of specific information from teachers about how children are doing in school. Another concern, and one around which the parents have organized, is changing the school lunch menu so that children have more nutritious food and Asian food as an option. As part of this campaign, parents have designed a strategy that includes recruiting more community members to be involved, conducting a parent survey about the school lunch menu, meeting with the food services director, presenting a plan to the school board, and developing a media effort (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002).

Schools have high expectations of parental involvement at home and in school, and yet the conditions of impoverished families often make such involvement difficult. Although there are well-intentioned teachers and principals who are interested in reaching out to low-income parents, there are also those who view them from a deficit perspective. This perspective is evident in negative attitudes about parents' failure to complement school efforts to educate their children and beliefs about the need to change families rather than to understand how parenting roles can be supported. Community-based social service organizations can provide opportunities for low-income parents to become *advocates* of improved relationships with schools. Bloom's ethnography of impoverished single mothers, for example, illustrates how a community-based grassroots organization developed an advocacy plan with mothers and school administrators to address the strained relationships between parents and school staff at meetings to discuss a child's academic difficulties (Bloom, 2001). The mothers felt intimidated by these meetings, where they were alone in confronting as many as seven to ten school staff that wielded their professional status in demeaning ways. To address the mothers' concerns about these meetings, the advocacy plan consisted of a role play that involved a mother and several school staff to resolve a fictitious fourth-grade boy's poor performance, and a debriefing session. Through the role play, the mothers could air their concerns in a safe environment and feel empowered. The school staff also gained a different perspective to the meetings, that of

an impoverished parent wanting her child to succeed. In addition, the mothers have insisted on having a community volunteer attend the meetings with them to serve as an ally.

Community organizing groups that advocate for improved housing, economic development opportunities, and neighborhood conditions for low-income residents are also turning their attention to education reform. They have recruited parents to become leaders in improving the quality of schools, and have made impressive gains in addressing parents' concerns about children's safety, afterschool activities, school size and school climate (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002a; Shirley, 1997). Unlike other forms of family involvement, education organizing is political and focuses on building parent and community power. This approach can make it suspect among school officials who are not accustomed to demands for public accountability. When schools resist change and discourage parent activism, organizing groups resort to confrontational tactics that deepen conflict. When community organizing groups, however, maintain working relationships with schools, home-school connections have improved (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002b). Parents increase their presence and roles in schools. They serve as tutors in class and in afterschool programs, lead parenting workshops, and help maintain school safety.

Conclusion

The conventional portrait of community partnership in education emphasizes the use of community resources for schools and students. Communities, however, have an untapped potential for supporting and promoting family involvement in education. Families turn to community members—such as coworkers, neighbors, and friends—to enhance their children's learning opportunities. Community organizations open up opportunities for parents to learn about and participate in educational issues affecting their children. We are just beginning to understand the ways that communities can be a force in involving families in children's learning and development. Future research needs to deepen and expand the ideas we have explored in this chapter.

Implications for Educators

Teachers and school leaders should expand notions of parent involvement beyond home and school to include community. This suggests the need for educators to develop greater awareness of the community settings and institutions that provide opportunities for family involvement. Some specific actions that schools can take include the following:

Take a tour or revisit the community. Whether an educator lives in the community or outside it, visiting neighborhoods and talking to people in the community about the places families frequent and the activities that their children access when school ends can provide a wealth of information about children's lives outside of school. Educators can develop lists that document the resources, supports, and occasions for family involvement that currently exist, and those that could be created. Home visits also provide educators with an opportunity to listen to parents and to observe how the home supports children's learning. This exploration in the home and community can generate ideas about ways to connect with families and how community activities can intersect with classroom experiences.

Expand parent networks. Educators can help connect parents to each other and expand their social ties. This connection can enrich parents' knowledge about involvement practices to support children's learning. It also can stimulate children's access to other people in the community who can enrich children's social and educational experiences. Family resource centers, for example, provide a space where parents can go to meet each other informally and build a sense of community. With the help of educators, family resource center staff can build parent interest for supporting children's learning in school and afterschool.

Make connections with community organizations. When schools collaborate with community organizations, they can interact with parents that may be difficult to reach individually. Holding parent meetings in community settings can make parents feel more comfortable, especially when they can communicate in their native languages and gain access to community translators. Educators can also learn more about their students and families from those who have contact with them in their broader roles as community members. This exposure also lends itself to exploring new ideas and roles for parents in their children's education. One advantage of creating alliances with community organizations and leaders is their credibility among parents. The message of family involvement becomes more powerful for parents when community leaders express and demonstrate support for it.

The Cases

In this section, we have included four teaching cases that highlight the linkages across several microsystems and encourage readers to consider the theoretical lenses in Chapter 3 as analytical tools for further exploring the dilemmas these cases describe. The cases contained herein—"Lunchtime at Sunnydale Elementary School," "Defining 'Fine,'" "Bilingual Voices and Parent Classroom Choices," and "Staying on the Path Toward College"—all illustrate the ways in which microsystems are connected, and the ways in which coordination across these systems can facilitate (or be disruptive to) children's positive development. The theoretical lenses in the preceding chapter provide but two ways of uncovering some of the specific processes and mechanisms by which such coordination can help or hurt children's outcomes. Lenses appearing in other sections of this volume might also be applied and may lead to different ideas about how one might resolve the dilemmas presented here.

Case 4: Lunchtime at Sunnydale Elementary School

What Do First Graders Need?

by Barrie Thorne

Characters:

- Rosa and Maria, first graders
- Beatriz, Rosa and Maria's grandmother
- Tish, Maria's 16-month-old sister
- Lena, Maria's mother
- Linda, Sunnydale Elementary School principal
- Matty, cafeteria worker
- Mary, P.T.A. parent

As you read this case, consider applying the following theoretical lenses in your analysis:

- **Executive Functioning:** How is the family acting as an executive functionary in this case? How is the school acting as an executive functionary? How can better coordination be achieved between the families and the school?
- **Family Support:** What is the nature of parent participation in decision-making to effect schoolwide change? How can it be improved? To what extent is the school demonstrating cultural competence?
- **Ecocultural Understanding:** What are the different perceptions of development in middle childhood expressed in this case? How can the principal and the parents develop greater awareness of their own culturally-based expectations of children?

BEATRIZ, ROSA AND MARIA'S GRANDMOTHER

Beatriz Hinojosa worried that her granddaughters didn't get enough to eat at school. Rosa, the six-year-old, had asthma and was small for her age. Rosa's cousin, Maria, was five-and-a-half; they were in the same bilingual first-grade class at Sunnydale School. On weekdays, the grandmother was responsible for Rosa, Maria, and Tish, Maria's 16-month-old sister, from early in the morning when the girls' mothers set off for work until they returned at dinner time. Beatriz's daughters were both single mothers in their mid-twenties. They and their children shared an apartment a block away from the apartment where Beatriz lived with her son and his wife. Early each morning, Beatriz picked up her three granddaughters and drove to the school, aiming to get there by 7:30 a.m. so that the girls could participate in the free breakfast program.

Maria and Rosa were so little that the grandmother wasn't comfortable just dropping them off. On the first day of the school year, she began a routine of parking the car and, with the toddler in tow, guiding the girls through the school, across the upper playground, and into the small portable building that housed the school cafeteria. A parent volunteer organized the orange juice, cereal, and milk and stood to the side as Beatriz helped Maria and Rosa prepare their bowls and choose where to sit. The atmosphere felt rushed, and one time a group of older kids threw food. Maria and Rosa often dawdled, eating only a few bites before the bell rang. After the bell, Beatriz said goodbye to her granddaughters as the parent volunteer guided them and the other younger kids toward their classrooms in the main building. Then Beatriz drove home and took care of Tish until 2:45 p.m., when it was time to return to the school to pick up Rosa and Maria.

Two weeks into the school year, when Beatriz pulled into the pick-up area, Rosa and Maria bustled into the car, full of news. "When we got our lunches today, some big kids shoved us around," Rosa said. "Yeah, they shoved us, and I was so scared, I nearly dropped my tray," Maria added.

The girls had even more to tell: Their classroom had been moved from the main school building and into a portable across the playground. The only bathrooms were in the main building, and if one of them had to go during the class period, they had to choose a partner, get a pass, and walk across the playground to the bathroom and back again by themselves. This bit of news startled Lena, Maria's mother, and she observed, "Little kids shouldn't be allowed out on their own like that; it would be easy for one of them to wander off." The three adults talked it over and agreed that the grandmother, who was the family's main connection to the school, should find out what was going on.

The next day Beatriz and Tish went to the school at noontime. They walked alongside Rosa and Maria in the first-graders' queue as it slowly moved from the portable, across the playground, up the stairs, and into the cafeteria. When they finally got inside, Beatriz watched as the girls pointed to their names on the free lunch roster, got trays, and reached for prepackaged food items and cartons of milk. The grandmother leaned over and pointed out that they were supposed to choose between pizza or a cheese sandwich. Then she looked around the crowded room and squeezed her granddaughters and herself (with Tish on her lap) onto the bench at one of the tables.

It all felt noisy, chaotic, and hurried. Young kids take a long time to eat, but the bell was already ringing, and other kids were standing up to leave with their lunches only half finished. Beatriz didn't think her granddaughters were eating enough. And when they walked across the busy playground toward the portable classroom, they had to skirt around bigger kids who were playing jump rope and kickball and just hanging out. Rosa said that the day before when she got a pass and was walking to the bathroom with Gloria, some big kids were out at recess and almost ran into them. Beatriz grew more and more perturbed. Didn't the teachers care about the safety of the little ones? What would happen if one of her granddaughters got hurt, or somehow wandered out of the school yard?

LINDA CHANG, PRINCIPAL

The principal, Linda Chang, always had a lot to juggle when the school year began, but this year was especially pressed. For the first time the school had a breakfast program for lower-income students, but there was no one to oversee it, and she had had to ask quite a few parents until she found one willing and able to volunteer to run it every day. The school was not only short of staff, but also short of space. The spring before the state had mandated smaller class sizes for the first three grades, and there weren't enough classrooms. After the first set of enrollment figures came in, Linda had to hire two additional teachers and arrange for the delivery of three portable buildings in order to create enough classrooms. Then a long-awaited donation of computers arrived, which she had promised to the fourth grades. But one of the fourth-grade classrooms was in a portable, and the portables didn't have enough wiring for computers. There weren't many choices, and Linda ended up moving the first-grade Spanish bilingual class into the portable, which opened a well-wired room in the main building for the fourth graders and the new computers.

There were other changes that fall. Linda had to persuade the teachers, whose contracts specified that they did not have to be on duty during lunchtime, that they needed to take the time to walk their students, single file, down to the playground by the cafeteria. At the end of lunchtime, they also were supposed to come down and meet their students and lead them, single file, back to their classrooms. This routine was part of a new system of playground discipline that was developed in response to a crisis the previous school year, when a fifth-grade boy threw rocks and injured a younger child. Rumors circulated about playground violence, and parents phoned the school and e-mailed the principal to express concern. Several teachers met with the P.T.A. Board, and then with Linda, the principal, and worked out a new set of policies.

Getting 420 students fed and back to class within roughly an hour was a real challenge. When she had time, Linda did her best to be an ordering presence in the cafeteria, helping Matty Harris, who oversaw the distribution of food and kept an eye on students eating at the tables. The cafeteria didn't have enough space for all, or even half, of the school's students to eat at the same time. Students ate in two age-ordered shifts. The older grades went first, because older kids eat more quickly. Thirty-five minutes later, a second bell rang, and queues of students from the first and second grades moved from classrooms to the upper playground, with "bag lunch kids" settling in at the picnic tables and "school lunch kids" lining up to go into the cafeteria. The school lunch line was longer than ever that fall because the number of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch had gone up. Lower-income immigrants were moving into the school intake area, and there had been an increase in transfers to the school from low-income, predominantly African-American areas of the city.

THE GRANDMOTHER ENCOUNTERS SCHOOL STAFF

One day, early in the school year, the principal saw an older Latina woman, holding a toddler, move along the lunchline in tandem with two girls from Mr. Turner's first-grade Spanish bilingual class. She guessed that it was the girls' grandmother and went over and introduced herself; then she was paged and had to hurry back to the office. The next day the grandmother and the toddler again showed up walking next to Rosa and Maria at the end of the line. The principal was away at a meeting, and Matty Harris, the sole cafeteria worker, was especially hassled because they were once again way behind, and the bell would ring in ten minutes. Matty asked the students to choose an entrée more quickly.

Carefully holding their loaded trays, Maria and Rosa followed their grandmother to the tables, but there was no space left, so Beatriz, the grandmother, went over to Mrs. Harris and asked, "Where can I set my girls to eat?"

"You'll have to go outside," Mrs. Harris said.

Beatriz took the toddler's hand, and with the other hand she gently guided the girls, still carrying their trays, down the stairs and to an empty space at one of the picnic tables. They settled in and began to eat. Then one of the playground aides came over and said, "You can't take school lunches outside; you have to eat them inside."

Beatriz was exasperated. "There was no room inside. What are we supposed to do?" The aide shrugged and walked away.

When Beatriz returned at the end of the school day, she parked the car and went to an area near the portables where she had sometimes seen parents of the Spanish-speaking first graders gather to talk while they waited for their children. She joined the group and discovered that they were also upset that the first-grade bilingual class, which began the year secure in the main building, had been bumped out to a portable. Some of the mothers had also heard about big kids shoving little kids in the cafeteria and about scary walks to the bathroom. They agreed that first graders were too little to put up with these problems.

Discussion of "the cafeteria and the bathroom problems" continued in phone and other conversations, until one of the first-grade parents, Mary Ramos, an Anglo woman married to a man from Mexico, suggested that they go as a group to the monthly P.T.A. meeting that was scheduled for the following Thursday evening. Mary, who was college-educated and studying to be a bilingual teacher, was the only one in Latino circles who was active in the P.T.A. She said that she would present the group's complaints to the principal.

THE P.T.A. MEETING

The small core of parents active in the Sunnydale P.T.A. were nearly all middle-class and college-educated. Most of them were White, with a handful of African Americans. The "P.T.A. parents," as they were known around the school, were aware of and troubled by the mismatch between the educational, income, and racial/ethnic makeup of the P.T.A. and the overall composition of the school (See Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Sunnydale Elementary School

Location	Large Western city, population over 1,000,000
Grades served	K-5
Enrollment	420
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latino • Asian and Southeast Asian • African American • White • Other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18% 25% 45% 10% 2%
Students eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch	48%
Certified teachers	90%

The P.T.A. parents worked hard to bring more resources to the school. They organized fundraisers and ran a scrip program at the grocery store. They served on the school site committee and attended and spoke out at school board meetings. They had also tried various forms of outreach to other Sunnydale parents, such as free spaghetti dinners, and, when they could get expert help, having key announcements translated into Spanish and Cantonese. They knew that there were big gaps of language and cultural understanding among families at the school and that many of the other parents worked long hours in inflexible jobs and had extremely difficult lives.

Several of the Latino parents had tried coming to P.T.A. meetings in the past, but even if they understood some of the English, half the time they couldn't figure out what was being talked about. Back home in places like Mexico and Guatemala, teachers were the experts, and schools didn't talk about parent involvement. The immigrant parents felt inadequate and excluded when they were with the Americans who seemed to run things. But this time Mary Ramos, the Spanish-speaking Anglo mother who was friendly with them and active in the P.T.A., would be there speaking out on their behalf, and they were attending as a group with a purpose.

When Beatriz and her daughter Lena entered the auditorium, they went over to sit with the other six Spanish-speaking parents. Mary Ramos sat near the front of the group and softly paraphrased the content of the discussion in Spanish. Beatriz (who migrated to the United States from Mexico when she was 15) and Lena (who was born and raised in the United States) were the only other fluent English speakers in the Latino group.

After an hour of discussion about issues such as the format of report cards, fundraising, and planning for a school Halloween party, the P.T.A. president, an African-American man, asked if there were any new items for the agenda. Mary Ramos stood up and turned toward the principal.

"Ms. Chang, these parents and I have children in the same first-grade class. We are coming to the meeting to figure out if there is some way that our smaller children can be safer. They were moved to a portable outside and have to walk across the playground to the bathroom and older kids bump them."

Lena chimed in, "The younger ones are out by themselves without supervision." Beatriz added, "One of my girls has asthma. She's little, and she doesn't remember to put on a coat and take an umbrella."

The principal responded by describing the various pressures that led to the decision to switch classrooms and put the first-grade bilingual class in a portable. She reminded them that the bilingual class was lucky because they not only had a teacher, but also a Spanish-speaking aide who came three mornings a week. Then she addressed the bathroom policy:

"Other first graders also have to have hall passes and walk by themselves to the bathroom. Children are dismissed to go to the bathroom during the two recess times, and otherwise only in an emergency, when they go with a partner, take a pass, and go straight to the restroom." In short, she tried to reassure the parents that school policies were being evenly applied, and that there were reasons for the switch of classrooms.

But Mary, who was intent on being a spokesperson for a group of parents she felt the school was neglecting, wasn't satisfied. She responded, "They feel that their children are being tossed around. They would like to be involved and help make it smoother for their children."

Beatriz wanted the principal to know about the troubling things she had seen during her visits to the school. "I started going to school breakfast and lunch, to make sure my girls are eating," she said. "I saw kids throw food, and there isn't enough time for younger kids to eat. And the big kids are on the playground at the same time as the little kids go to the bathroom, and they run into the little kids."

The problems spilled out, one on top of the other. Linda Chang, feeling she had already addressed the bathroom issue, picked up on Beatriz's complaints about school meals. "Last year children were handed individual servings. The District is doing things a new way this year, with a choice of two entrées, and the food is better because it's hotter, but it takes more time. I agree that supervision is limited. If you can," (she looked pointedly at Beatriz) "volunteer to help with breakfast."

Beatriz replied, "I teach my granddaughters to take this and this. The problem is the big kids; you should have the older ones come after the little kids."

Linda responded, "We tried, but we feed over 250 every day. Lunch periods are only 35 minutes long, and the older children go first. It's too slow if the little ones eat first. I don't like to see big boys and girls pushing little ones. It was a mistake that the older ones came in late that day."

Beatriz wasn't satisfied: "Where can I sit my girls to eat? There was no room in the cafeteria, so we went outside, and then the woman, she came and told us, 'You can't take your food outside.' Where are my girls supposed to sit?"

Linda once again suggested a course of action: "We welcome volunteers."

Then a kindergarten parent spoke up with a different issue, and attention turned away from the first-grade parents and their concerns. At the end of the meeting, the principal, Linda Chang, went over to the Spanish-speaking group and gave them flyers prepared by the P.T.A. that read: "We need volunteers—room parents, library, breakfast, lunchtime, fundraisers, in the classroom. Your involvement benefits your child. Please get involved. They will be proud of you and knowing you care raises their self-esteem."

Beatriz, Lena, and the other Latino parents once again felt shoved aside. As they left the meeting, Lena turned to her mother and asked, "What about some kind of caring?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Major Issues

The purpose of this case is for educators to consider divergent perspectives on children's development and family-school relations and how school and family cultures shape these views and practices. The case is designed to help educators understand the following:

- The relationships between schools and immigrant families
- The ways cultural beliefs and practices shape families' perceptions of child development and their subsequent school involvement
- The concerns of parents and other caregivers and their efforts to change school practice

Describing the Situation

- What are Maria and Rosa Hinojosa like?
- How does Beatriz Hinojosa view Maria and Rosa?
- How much personalized adult help and supervision does Beatriz believe a first grader needs? What is the principal, Linda Chang's, perspective?
- What concerns do Beatriz, Lena, and the other first-grade bilingual parents have about the school? What strengths and assets do they bring to the situation?
- How does the spokesperson, Mary Ramos, frame the situation?
- Describe parent-based changes that have already emerged at Sunnysdale Elementary.
- What is the dilemma in this case?

Exploring Contributing Factors

- How and why might a family perspective of the lunchtime situation at Sunnysdale differ from the perspective of a principal responsible for an organization of over 400 students?
- How do different cultural beliefs and practices, for example, about food and safety, relate to the situation?
- How does Beatriz's view of volunteering and family involvement in the school compare with the principal's view?
- What are Beatriz's underlying beliefs about professionalism versus caring? The principal's? How do these differences contribute to miscommunication in the case?

Articulating Possible Next Steps

- How might Beatriz and her two daughters become more involved in the school P.T.A.? How might this involvement lead to the school becoming more responsive to diverse groups of students and caregivers? What impact might this have on Beatriz's lunchtime concerns?
- If a similar situation happened in your community, what kinds of organizations might help the Latino parents develop a strategy for changing school practices?
- How might the school support informal parent interactions and facilitate parent networking that has organically emerged?

Replaying the Case

- What strategies has the P.T.A. tried to involve parents who are immigrants, non-English-speaking, and lower income that have not succeeded? What else might they do differently given practical constraints?

- Identify situations in the case where teachers and school staff were insensitive to family needs. How might the school better help teachers and school staff develop the attitudes, beliefs, and practices to build stronger relationships with families?
- How might the principal have responded more appropriately to Beatriz and other first-grade bilingual parents' concerns? Why was her suggestion of volunteering more insensitive?

Looking at the Bigger Picture

- How much supervision does a first grader need?
- How might an administrator manage the organizational needs of a school while remaining responsive to individual family concerns?

RECOMMENDED READING

- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (2001). *The power of community: Mobilizing for family and community*. Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield.
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- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (1978). *Worlds apart: Relationships between families and schools* (pp. 20–42). New York: Basic Books.
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Case 5: Defining "Fine"

Communicating Academic Progress to Parents¹

by Margaret Caspe and Holly Kreider

Characters:

- Dick, Peterson Elementary School Principal
- Nathan, first grader
- Molly, Nathan's mother
- Margot, Molly's friend
- Tammy, Nathan's teacher

In a small rural state, an act is signed into law. The act ensures overall educational quality in the state's schools through equitable school funding via changes to the property tax system and adoption of rigorous statewide and local academic standards. Under the new act, every school in the state is required to create an action plan for improvement. The action plan must be developed with input from parents, teachers, and community members. The statute further requires each school to assess student performance under the plan, so that there is some measure of how well the plan is working. Student performance results must then be delivered to community members. Therefore, committee members will need to know how to interpret and act on school performance data, as well as how to communicate the information to the community at large.

THE PRINCIPAL, DICK LEONARD

Dick Leonard, a principal of 24 years, was returning to his office at Peterson Elementary School after a long day of meetings at the District Office. Peterson Elementary is a relatively modern school facility with a small-town feel. The school has 13 full-time teachers along with a number of part-time aides and specialists. The only language spoken in the school is English, and the population is about 99 percent White. The school enjoys minimal safety concerns and few discipline problems. Nearly everyone in the school knows one another and many of the teachers taught the parents of current students or know their parents through community connections (see Table 4.2).

As you read this case, consider applying the following theoretical lenses to your analysis:

- Executive Functioning: What are the opportunities and challenges in coordinating children's various social executive functionaries relating to academic progress? What are the similarities and differences in how each actor in the case evaluates Nathan's progress?
- Community Support: What is the role of the larger community in communicating academic progress? How does the new legislation impact the community's role in the school?
- Family Support: What parent-to-parent informal networks exist in this case and can be harnessed for school decision making and parent empowerment?

Dick rolled down the window and started to recap the important points of the day's events. Although controversial, he didn't think the law, which was the topic of the meeting, was all that bad. He was told that state test results would be coming back soon, and with that data, staff, parents, and community would all need to come together to form an action plan for approval by the school board.

Table 4.2 Peterson Elementary School

Location	Rural New England town, population 2,500
Grades served	K-6
Enrollment	<i>N</i> = 310, 96% Caucasian
Students eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch	20%
Average class size	20
School staff	13 full-time regular teachers (100% Caucasian & female)
Percent of students meeting or exceeding state math standards	86%
Percent of students meeting or exceeding state reading standards	85%
School-based services	Regular evaluation of all children and provision of educational enrichment to any child deemed eligible (either because they are above or below the "accepted criterion"), reading enrichment program, summer school
Parent involvement opportunities	Parent/teacher council and classroom-specific opportunities including portfolio nights, parent-teacher conferences, field trips, classroom volunteering, and Grandparents Day
Community events	Fundraisers, church-based events, sporting events, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts

He knew that on the systemic level, this meant making tough decisions about which programs to keep and which to let go in order to increase student success. He had already done away with some of the less academically oriented parent events. Parents would need to be involved in the decision-making process. They would need to understand the standards and what it looked like for a child to successfully meet those standards. He believed these changes would start at the classroom level with the parent-teacher relationship.

"When parents come to school, we have to get them on the same page as us. This starts with the relationships between teachers and parents. Parents don't come to conferences to talk about social stuff. They want to know what their kids can and can't do. I am very clear with my teachers on how they should run their

parent-teacher conferences. I don't say the specifics, but I remind them that we're dealing with the state standards and frameworks, and that we need to articulate this to our parents. We need to educate parents because our academic system is different than when they came to school. We need to talk about new assessments. We need to talk about math, reading, and writing performance. They need to understand why we're choosing certain books for reading."

Dick believed from experience and research that what parents and families want most from schools is a good experience for their kids. Parents want schools first and foremost that are safe and treat kids with care, understanding, and fairness. There was no question in his mind that different parents wanted different things, but he knew they all wanted to see their kids succeed.

"Parents need to understand what success is. They need to talk to their kids about the importance of school and listening to their teachers. On the flip side, teachers need to be able to articulate to parents what their kids should be able to do. You can't have high standards and low expectations for kids and families at the same time."

Dick had initiated a number of new school-wide policies based on these beliefs. He had eliminated the practice of giving letter grades. At the beginning of the school year, he distributed a summary of first- and second-grade standards for language arts and math to all parents of first- and second-grade students. He required teachers to use these standards to develop curriculum and evaluate student performance. At the meeting that morning, he was quite vocal in explaining his rationale to his colleagues.

"A kid might get an *A*, and the parents think they know what their kid learned. Well, they don't know. They only know he got an *A*. We need to show what that *A* means, what the content and performance standards are, and where a kid is in relation to the standards. We have to explain if a kid is meeting the standards, exceeding them or below them. That's why standards were developed in the first place. You can tie your *A* to standards. Standards are a tool that let teachers and parents monitor the rigor of the work children are expected to do. Unfortunately, standards might be public documents, but they're not accessible and understandable. I think that we in education need to take more responsibility in explaining to parents what standards mean. This will get directly at the issue of parents not having trust in the system."

Dick had talked about building trust back into the system. Over the years, he believed that deteriorating confidence was one of the main problems that existed between the public and public institutions. If teachers and schools could communicate progress and standards with families better, then that would be the first step in building more confidence in the system.

Dick thought of his own situation as a father. He had stopped going to parent-teacher conferences for his daughter when she was a sophomore in high school. During one back-to-school night, he asked his daughter's math teacher to talk about the standards in her classroom. Dick was shocked that the teacher could not clearly express what she expected from his daughter and the others. Nor could she show him some of his daughter's work when he requested it. He felt his time had been wasted.

As Dick drove into the parking lot, he saw the usual crowd of parents waiting to pick up their children. He noticed Molly Burnham among them. She was one of his involved mothers, and he was always pleased to see her in her son Nathan's classroom. He believed that this was one of the best ways for parents to learn how to be their child's first teacher. Understanding assessment, from his perspective, was just another level of this. As he pulled into his parking spot he renewed his vows to make things different at his school from how they had been in the past.

THE PARENTS, MOLLY AND MARGOT

Molly and her friend Margot, both parents at Peterson Elementary, stood in the parking lot waiting to pick up their children. Molly was upset because her son, Nathan, who was in first grade, had been recommended for summer school. She knew that he was reading on grade level, so was surprised to hear the recommendation two weeks ago at parent-teacher conferences. She and her husband decided not to send their son to the summer classes. As a 30-year-old White mother of two, Molly worked only part time so that she could spend more time at home with her children. Much of this time was spent on making Nathan a strong reader. She confided her concerns to her friend Margot.

"Reading is one of the areas where it took him a long time to pick it up, because he resists when he has trouble learning. But we're really working on helping him understand that just because things are a little difficult doesn't mean it can't be done. I keep telling him it's like playing Nintendo—not that I like him to sit there hour after hour—but there are things that are hard, and then he'll get help, and he'll do it. So eventually this year, he really did pick up his reading. He can read fluently and understand what he's reading. He's now on grade level exactly. And that was important to me."

Molly had advocated for her son to be in the special enrichment school-day reading program but other kids were ahead of him so he couldn't enroll. Because of this, she worked on reading with him a lot at home.

"We read all the time, even if it's the back of a cereal box. We read signs, we look at the board at the bus station, and if he recognizes that something looks colorful and interesting, he'll read that. We read a story every night. It's mostly the same books all the time, but he likes the repetitions and knowing words immediately.

"His teacher told me he was doing well, that he was on grade level. But now she's recommending him for summer school. I really don't think it was fair. Why is she concerned about summer slippage when we spend so much time reading with Nathan at home? We have nearly twenty library books taken out! Besides, I kept trying to get him help during the year, but there were other special needs kids ahead of him. And he's not even special needs. And now they want him to miss his summer, and he's only in the first grade. Why would she suggest summer school out of nowhere?"

Margot, the other mother, responded. "This school just has a lot of trouble letting us know how our kids are doing. My oldest son is in fourth grade, and his report cards have been getting stupider and stupider over the years. By fourth grade, you really need to have some kind of letter grade. Let me know where he

stands! I just can't figure it out. Last quarter I got this report that says 'he's meeting the standard,' or 'he's not meeting the standard,' or 'he's exceeding the standard.' These report cards don't even tell you if your kid is really doing okay. I mean they moved my son up a level, which is great. But we're also a little worried about that because I don't know if he's doing A work, B work, or C work. You don't have any control over how they do the report cards anymore.

"And at the parent-teacher conferences, teachers just present a portfolio and tell a parent that the child is doing fine. Teachers need to *show* what fine means. It needs to be concrete. You know, we come into school and they go over the kids' progress, their report card, and their strengths and weaknesses. Yes, you meet the teacher. You get the report card. Then she has folders with some work in them, but what does it all mean? What do I have to compare it to?"

Molly thought more about it. She didn't mind having standards or benchmarks to show progress. Because of her loose work schedule, she was in the school a lot and felt she had a good handle on what was going on. She understood the different strategies the teachers used in reading and how she could help Nathan beyond asking him to sound things out. But she also felt the curriculum was a bit overwhelming, and that the new standards made it hard to read letters and notes sent home by the school. She was worried sometimes that even though she was actively involved, she was not getting the total picture and not getting a lot out of the communications with the school.

Molly looked at Margot and said, "I think the school also needs to send home information in between quarters to let you know how your kids are doing. I know that when the kids leave school, teachers are allowed to have their time. But if they could have progress reports or open houses or a potluck dinner—they don't do those things anymore."

Margot and Molly agreed that they missed the monthly school potluck dinners where families from the community would come together for relaxing evenings. It gave parents time to catch up with one another and children a chance to play together.

At this point, Nathan came bounding out of school and gave his mom a big hug. "Let's go play in the park," he yelled.

THE TEACHER, TAMMY GRAY

Tammy Gray, Nathan's teacher, began to clean up her room after dismissal. Teaching at Peterson Elementary for over 10 years, Tammy was a respected educator and friend to many in the building. As she straightened out the reading record folders, she smiled as she ran across Nathan's. He was the success of her year. He came into her class in the fall with a lot of difficulty reading and was very behind with his sounds and his retention of words. She worked one-on-one with him for most of the year.

"Without the one-on-one, I'm not sure what would have happened. He might have picked it up, but because he was so much lower than the others, it's hard to say. But now I expect him to continue reading at the average level next year. He's doing well with his research on zebras, and he's just so excited about

anything he reads and writes. His mom's in school a lot, and if she's walking by, he'll bring her something that he's written and show it to her."

But Tammy was also concerned.

"I just don't want him to lose what he's learned—we've worked so hard this year and he's come along so well. I don't want him to hit the 'summer slide' so to say. Molly acted surprised when I suggested he attend summer school to prevent this. Hasn't she been tracking his progress through the year? I don't even think she realizes how low he was coming in."

Tammy looked out her window and saw Nathan and his mother walking to the park. She had an unsettled feeling in her stomach. She finished tidying up her room and walked down the hall to the main office. She thought about all the times parents were surprised at the end of the year when their children's promotion to the next grade was questioned. But Tammy felt she did her best.

"I send home numerous report cards and progress reports throughout the year. I even have my own progress reports that I try to send out during the report periods so that the door is open if parents want to discuss any problems. We hold report cards until the parent-teacher conferences to make sure that they arrive home and so that we can talk to the parents about them. In my class, I explain what the different standards are, the way the report cards are marked with a four-point rubric and what it means. I tell them how their child's doing in the different areas and let them know the concerns I might have. And then I ask the parent if they have questions for me, and quite often they don't. I don't know if that's because I've explained it so clearly or they just have no idea what to ask!"

Tammy always felt her discussions with parents were positive experiences. She believed educators need to go into conferences with an attitude of "What can we do to make this situation better for your child?" or "These are all the wonderful things your child can do." She walked into the office to check her mailbox. Inside, a flyer invited her and other teachers to take part in the school-design team created as a result of the new law. She wondered under her breath, "What a waste of time! I recognize many of the parents in this school have a lot of strengths and a lot to contribute. But, if parents don't even understand about their own kids' progress, how are they ever going to be able to participate in these school-wide teams to assess the progress of the entire school?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Major Issues

The purpose of this case is for educators to learn how to effectively communicate with families about children's academic progress. Special attention is given to parents' and teachers' divergent attitudes toward various types of assessment, including traditional letter grades and alternative tools such as portfolios. The case is designed to help educators understand the following:

- Parents' concerns about children's academic progress
- Ways to communicate children's progress to parents
- The influence of state policy on engaging families in school reform

Describing the Situation

- Describe the challenges the school faces in conveying student progress to families. Why has the principal stopped relying on letter grades as a way to describe students' academic performance?
- How do Molly Burnham and other parents feel about the school's assessment practices?
- How do parents' attitudes affect their relationships with teachers and their reactions to teachers' educational recommendations?
- What do Molly and Nathan do together at home and in the community to learn? Is the teacher aware of these activities?

Exploring Contributing Factors

- What factors outside of the school have contributed to the shift away from letter grades?
- Why are some parents responding negatively to new forms of student assessment?
- What is Tammy Gray's attitude toward parents in this case? How does this attitude influence her reaction to parent involvement on the school-design team?

Articulating Possible Next Steps

- As principal, what should Dick Leonard do to facilitate parents' understanding of children's academic progress in relation to the standards?
- As a teacher, what should Tammy do to respond to parents like Molly who are surprised by their children's end-of-the-year performance, despite having been informed of their progress throughout the year?
- How should Molly approach the school and/or teacher to convey her dissatisfaction with the school's ability to convey this information to parents?

Replaying the Case

- What could Dick, Molly, or Tammy have done differently in any part of the story? For example, what if parents had been involved in Dick's decision to eliminate letter grades? What if Tammy had told Molly about her concerns for Nathan earlier in the year? How would these actions have changed the evolution of the case?
- What legislation in your hometown, community, or state has been passed lately that sounds like the dilemma faced by this school and its families? What can you do in your area to influence legislation?

Looking at the Bigger Picture

- Is it more important to understand where children perform in relation to others in the class or to understand what they know and are able to do?

Why might educators and parents differ in their perspectives on this issue?
What can be done to resolve these differences?

- What are some of the key elements that define parent-teacher relationships?
- What role can Dick Leonard play in building trust and confidence in his school?
- Do you agree that letter grades tell parents nothing about their children's academic performance? Why or why not? What meaning do letter grades have for parents?
- What strategies can the principal adopt in developing a school-improvement action plan? Who should be the main stakeholders in developing this plan?
- How does the culture of power in the school serve to discourage parent participation?
- Identify a school where genuine parent participation in decision making occurs. What structures are in place to facilitate parent involvement? How have school leaders developed a culture of participation?

RECOMMENDED READING

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Case 6: Bilingual Voices and Parent Classroom Choices

Family Involvement in Language and Literacy²

by Margaret Caspe

Characters:

Nina, first grader

Inés, Nina's mother

Sonya, Nina's teacher

Andy, school principal

In 1968, Congress, for the first time, endorsed funding for bilingual education through the Bilingual Education Act. This was significant because up until this time, students were discouraged from speaking non-English languages. In 1974,

the Supreme Court followed Congress's lead and ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that schools are not free to ignore the need of limited-English-speaking children.

Today, bilingual education continues to be controversial. Many critics argue that the approach keeps students in a cycle of native language dependency that ultimately inhibits significant progress in English language acquisition. Proponents reason that if students first learn to read in the language in which they are fluent, they can then transfer the skills to English and develop stronger literacy in the long term. Complicating the debate is the range of programs that fall under the definition of bilingual education.

A growing movement within the debate argues to give families more control over deciding the placement of their children. Under most policies, parents are permitted to pull their children out of bilingual education only after the students are in such classes; schools are not required to seek the parents' approval before making placements. Schools are increasingly required to provide descriptions of program options and seek parental approval of students' placements in advance. However, proposals concerning parents' rights to choose often draw criticism. Opponents fear that the school system will not make information easily available to immigrant parents, especially those who speak little or no English, negating any informed parental choice.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that English Language Learner (ELL) students participate in statewide assessments, regardless of language ability—a huge challenge for many states and districts. Each state must specify how it will assess English Language Learners and develop a standard for measuring proficiency and progress.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER BATTLE OVER HOMEWORK

Inés Campos didn't know what to do. Her daughter Nina sat under the kitchen table crying, refusing to continue with her homework. "I don't like it! Don't like it! ¡No me gusta!" Nina screamed. Inés was exasperated. She had been helping Nina with her homework assignment for the past three hours and was beside herself. Inés wondered where her creative and artistic daughter was—the girl who loved to paint portraits of the neighbors. Nina's homework difficulties were beginning to make her hate school. Nina was not doing well academically and did not have many friends. Inés wondered if in choosing a monolingual classroom for her daughter she had made a poor decision.

As you read this case, consider applying the following theoretical lenses to your analysis:

- Executive Functioning: How is Inés' role as a primary caregiver and executive functionary influenced by school policies and practices regarding bilingualism and homework?

- **Community Support:** What resources in the community support and inhibit Inés' involvement with her daughter's learning?
- **Ethnic and Racial Minority Parenting:** In what ways do the cultures of Nina's home and school match and not match? Look for examples of community acculturation in this case.

CHOOSING AN ENGLISH-ONLY CLASSROOM FOR NINA: INÉS, NINA'S MOTHER (TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH)

"I know I am the defect for my child. She's not doing well in school because she doesn't speak English well. She doesn't like to read English books. She loves to hear stories—but she always asks that I read Spanish language books. She asks for Spanish because I put some flavor into it. You know when I read in Spanish I get animated. But in English, no. So, she doesn't even want to bring out a book in English."

Inés came to the United States from Mexico for a short vacation. She had not intended to remain in the United States and had never imagined coming to the country to work. In Mexico, she was a schoolteacher in good economic standing and surrounded by a loving family. When she became pregnant with Nina, however, she changed her mind.

"I feel that here Nina can do something. I don't say that in Mexico she can't do it, it's just that I think she has better chances to do it here. But the key in America is English. Nina has to learn to speak English quickly. I know from my own experience. Everything is hard for me. I work at a childcare center, sell products door-to-door, and clean houses, and I still depend on the government welfare. I sometimes feel trapped. I need to learn English so that I can undertake my own business and my own dreams. Right now I can't work with Americans because I don't understand English. So that is my goal—to learn English."

Inés reflected on her own struggles in not understanding the English language and was determined that her daughter should learn English first and foremost. Inés enrolled in adult English classes at the nearby high school and knew how difficult acquiring a second language was. She was adamant about placing Nina in an all-English classroom to bypass her own hardships. As well, she had been instructed by close friends at her church group not to speak with her daughter in Spanish so that she could develop a better grasp of the language.

In the beginning of the year, Nina was placed in a bilingual first-grade classroom. Inés went to the school and talked with the principal to request the all-English setting. She was grateful that the principal permitted the switch, but then faced the problem of not being able to help her daughter with homework.

At the parent-teacher conference in the beginning of the year, Inés was afraid to tell the teacher, Sonya Chesin, about her difficulties in helping Nina with homework and understanding what was being sent home. Nina translated throughout most of the meeting. When Inés asked the teacher for more direction

on how to help, Sonya encouraged Inés to read with her daughter in Spanish at home.

"The teacher says it doesn't hurt for children to learn both. So that's what I've been trying to do. I try to teach her Spanish because I promised the teacher that I would. I was a teacher in Mexico myself, and I notice that the different sounds get her a little confused—you know, the vowels all make different sounds. But we work on it. I've also been getting help from my friend Cora at church. She speaks both English and Spanish, and I send Nina over to her house to practice her English. But I don't like being so far from her. I feel a little like I'm losing her, and I don't want her to know how little English I know."

Inés did not tell Sonya that they were working on homework assignments for up to three hours each night.

"I don't want to tell the teacher too much because I don't want Nina in a bilingual class. I think where she is now is better as far as I understand. She has to learn English. If she learns Spanish, she will go down. But it worries me because I know she's very far behind. Too far behind. I ask her questions when she reads to me in Spanish, and I give her reading comprehension to see if she knows what she's reading—but she doesn't know. I wonder if she'll even go to second grade."

A BILINGUAL CLASSROOM MAY SUIT NINA BETTER: SONYA CHESIN, NINA'S TEACHER

"I'm going to send Nina to second grade. I think it's normal that she is having so many problems in school because English is her second language. It's very hard for children who speak Spanish to learn English. Because English is her second language, I expect her not to do as well as some of the other children. I'd be more concerned if she were a native English speaker. I guess Nina wouldn't be in my room if she really needed more Spanish support because I'm not the bilingual classroom. But I definitely think she needs remediation. She'll never be at the top of the group. You know, she just doesn't have the support at home. These are working people, you know, they're working people, and they don't have access. They probably don't go to the library a lot or go to museums or go to plays. They don't come from that kind of background, so it's pretty hard for them to give their children that kind of knowledge. Getting a job, staying alive, and putting food on the table is just a big chore."

As a veteran teacher at Morrison Elementary, Sonya believed that a bilingual placement might be a more enriching experience for Nina (see Table 2.1 in Chapter 2 for demographics about Morrison Elementary). She worried about Nina's reading and writing skills as well as her social emotional progress. Nina was very sensitive and cried a lot, especially when things were too difficult for her. Sonya attributed these difficulties to Nina's second-language acquisition. Sonya's homework policy followed the school guideline of 20-minute assignments every night except Fridays and holidays. She attempted to individualize the work and send notes in two languages, but due to the time constraints and a busy

teaching schedule; this often did not happen. She wished she had more regular communication with parents.

"I mentioned to Nina's mother at the first parent-teacher conference that she should really consider a bilingual placement for her daughter. She seemed very negative toward this suggestion. I think Spanish is a beautiful language and a real asset if she can speak both. So, I made some suggestions about how she might work with her daughter at home and work on beginning sounds. We have to abide by the parents' wishes."

IDENTIFYING BILINGUAL ISSUES AT MORRISON ELEMENTARY: ANDY BEBER, PRINCIPAL

"A number of parents in our school advocate for their children, and bilingual education has been a hot topic around here. Parents will often come to me and request one program or the other. What's interesting is you never know where someone will come out on the issue. The controversy is not just one side against another. I speak Spanish, so I think it's easier for parents to come to me. Some native speakers will come requesting a bilingual placement for their children although others come demanding a monolingual one. In our school, I think the most common problem that parents and teachers in our bilingual programs face is when children's English becomes stronger than their Spanish. The bilingual program becomes hard for them. So the system is often hard for language-delayed and English-improved students."

Morrison Elementary has transitional bilingual, two-way bilingual, and monolingual classrooms. Transitional bilingual education students spend the majority of their time learning in their native language, but spend a certain amount of the day developing English skills. At Morrison Elementary, the transitional bilingual class includes basic instruction in Spanish and 20 to 30 minutes a day of English instruction for English language development. Two-way bilingual or dual immersion bilingual education is instruction divided equally in two languages. This approach is intended for equal numbers of language minority and language majority students in the same classroom, with the ultimate goal of students becoming proficient in both languages. In monolingual classrooms, instruction is entirely in English. Andy Beber is responsible for determining children's placement in the monolingual rooms, then a random-number system assigns whoever is left to the dual classrooms, creating a mixture of language-ability children.

Third grade is typically the year when full bilingual students start making the transition to English instruction, but this is dependent on passing a Spanish test. The test is difficult for some students. For many who can never pass the test, the school eventually places them into English out of desperation. They often do poorly.

"I grapple with what the best system is. We have a wide range of families in our school coming from diverse communities, so it is hard to target our resources and audiences. I have parents who live in palaces, and I have families who live

in one-bedroom apartments. The majority of parents are very unresponsive and hard to reach. We don't have a lot of parent involvement in this school, so it's just hard to know what kinds of supports parents need."

INÉS WONDERES WHAT TO DO NEXT

Exasperated, Inés did not know what to do. Her daughter Nina continued to sit under the kitchen table crying, refusing to complete her homework. With the spring parent-teacher conference coming up in the next few weeks, Inés was prepared to ask again for help with the homework, but she also anticipated Sonya recommending a bilingual placement. She wondered if she had made the wrong decision by choosing a monolingual classroom for her daughter. Would Nina be better served in a bilingual classroom? How could she know? "I am the defect for my child," she thought.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Major Issues

The purpose of this case is for educators to consider choices parents make around bilingual education and the responsibility of the school to help parents make informed decisions. The case is designed to help educators better understand the following:

- The meanings and contexts of bilingual education for immigrant families
- Different ecological contexts shaping the child's development
- How schools can help families in their placement choices and their support of children's homework

Describing the Situation

- When are Nina and Inés most vitalized in their mother-daughter relationship? When do difficulties arise?
- What does Inés hope for Nina's future? What does she believe is the key in helping her obtain this? In what ways is Nina struggling?
- What do Inés and Sonya believe about bilingual education? How do their two perspectives come into conflict?

Exploring Contributing Factors

- How does the bilingual structure of the school affect Inés' choice of classroom placement for Nina?
- What assumptions does Sonya make about Inés? How do Inés and Sonya communicate? What effect might this have on Nina?
- How does Nina's placement in Sonya's classroom contribute to her academic performance and social-emotional development?

- What strengths does Inés bring as a parent to this placement dilemma? How might Sonya or Andy capitalize more on these strengths?
- In what ways does Sonya support Nina and Inés?
- How well does the school communicate with parents about issues of bilingual education? What impact does this have on Inés and Nina?

Articulating Possible Next Steps

- How might Inés initiate a conversation with Sonya about her homework difficulties at the next parent-teacher conference?
- If Sonya were aware of the homework situation, what might she suggest to help Inés?
- Who in the community might Inés turn to for support?

Replaying the Case

- How could Sonya have supported Inés and Nina more?
- What can Morrison Elementary do differently in terms of providing parents with the key information they need to make a good placement decision for their children?
- Suppose Inés had talked with other parents from the school to see how their children are learning English, furthering their Spanish, and gaining skills in the subject areas. How might this have changed Inés' placement decision or confidence in talking with Sonya?

Looking at the Bigger Picture

- What school structures impede or facilitate Inés in helping Nina with homework?
- What does Inés perceive as some of the structural barriers to resources?
- What kind of school culture (school norms, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and expectations) is needed to affirm the identities of the students in the school? What role should the principal play in nurturing this kind of culture?
- What is the role and responsibility of local institutions like public schools in helping immigrant families make decisions around bilingual education?
- What might be the role of parent or community groups who advocate for Latino children in helping Inés in this case?
- What should the key elements of an ESL policy for this school be?
- Is bilingual education a hot topic in your home area? What policies exist in your state related to English Language Learners? What resources in your community could you draw from to help Nina and Inés?

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Case 7: Staying on the Path Toward College

One Boy at the Crossroads

by Catherine R. Cooper, Elizabeth Dominguez,
Margarita Azmitia, Erica Holt,
Dolores Mena, and Gabriela Chavira

Characters:

Paulo, sixth grader

Rachel, community college outreach program director

Alberto, Paulo's father

Sarita, Paulo's mother

Alicia, family friend

Miguel, Alicia's son

Nancy, Paulo's math teacher

INTRODUCING PAULO

Paulo Dominguez sat around a table with a number of his fellow sixth graders eating potato chips and cookies. He and his classmates listened as a woman named Rachel Marquez talked about a program that would help prepare them for college. All sixth graders in the community were being recruited to submit applications to the program, which was designed to support them through middle and high school in learning the study habits and decision-making skills needed for college preparation and careers. The program, named Más Allá (connoting the meaning "beyond" in English), represented a long-term partnership between the town's community college and the larger nearby university. Its mission is to engage girls and boys into a program that builds long-term networks for academic success and support for pathways to college.

"Your lives consist of many worlds," she began, "and each world contains all the different people or groups in your life, like a family member or a friend, or sports teams, classmates, and church groups." Rachel began passing out colored pencils and paper to the students and invited each sixth grader to think about the different worlds in their lives. As Paulo began to draw pictures of his family, school, and church he thought about his present life in California and his future dreams of working with computers and maybe even designing video games.

Rachel then urged the youths to think about the positive and negative influences in each of these worlds. Paulo looked over at his two best friends making faces and amusing gestures behind Rachel's back. Paulo began to feel self-conscious about following Rachel's instructions, turned his paper over, and started drawing video game characters instead.

As you read this case, consider applying the following theoretical lenses to your analysis:

- Executive Functioning: Who are the significant individuals scaffolding Paulo's thought processes? What factors make this a critical period in the development of his ability to self-regulate?
- Community Support: How can community programs engage parents to support the learning and development of youth? What community bridging strategies are available to the parents in this case?
- Ethnic and Racial Minority Parenting: How are Paulo's parents' parenting practices affected by their past experiences? How do their beliefs influence their goals for Paulo?

When school let out, Paulo walked home. He lives in a small trailer in an RV lot with his parents, older brother, and two younger siblings. His parents came to California as Mexican immigrants.

"If I tell my friends I want to join the college outreach program, they'll think I'm a schoolboy. But Mama always says that if I don't go to college I won't have a good future. My mom loved to go to school, but had to quit school to start working when she was 12. Her mom didn't let her do her homework, even though she really liked to do homework. Instead, she had to do chores. Mama tells me that I need to go to college if I want to get a good job and buy a house. Going to college helps you get a job instead of being a drug dealer or other things that cause you to get in trouble with the cops."

However, Paulo, who was always a good student, had been slipping. His math teacher had recently recommended him for the remedial track, and more and more frequently, he was not turning in homework assignments. When Paulo reached home, his mother was in the kitchen cooking dinner while his father was reading the newspaper at the kitchen table. He had been in the fields picking strawberries since five in the morning. "*Hola mi'jito* (hello my son)," his father said as Paulo poured himself a glass of water, "*Como te fue en la escuela?* (how was school?)"

PAULO'S FAMILY

Alberto Dominguez, Paulo's father, spent his childhood in Mexico and completed an elementary education at a *primaria* (elementary school) in a rural village

where there was no middle or high school. When he moved to a nearby town in an adjacent state to find better work, he met his future wife, Sarita.

After Sarita and Alberto were married, they decided to make the trip to California to find work and give their children a better start in life. Sarita started working in a factory on an assembly line while Alberto worked in the fields picking strawberries. Sarita took English classes at night until she became pregnant with their first child, Raul. She attended other classes in Spanish, including birthing and child care. Since then she has had three other children and continues to work part time in the factory.

SARITA, PAULO'S MOTHER

"I'm quite concerned about Paulo. His father and I want him to be safe, both physically and emotionally, and we want him to have an equal chance to learn and succeed. But lately, I see him being less with the family and more with his friends. I know this is a time for him that's difficult. He's getting older, and relationships and friendships get harder, but I want to help him make the right decisions so we can guide him to college and to stay on the good path. I don't want him to get into drugs or a gang, or get a girl pregnant.

"But I do worry. At the same time that we want Paulo to succeed in school, I'm afraid we're not able to help him. I don't like to go to the school much. Raul, my oldest son, dropped out of school a few months ago, but when he first started having trouble, I got a call from one of his teachers. They called me to go there. I was very scared because I was unfamiliar with the system and the language. No one spoke my language except for the principal and one other teacher who translated for Raul's teacher. I asked them both about the problem involving my son, and the principal and the teacher weren't very helpful. I just felt like they wanted me to leave. Raul dropped out a few months later.

"We aren't here in the United States because we like working here or love living here. We live better in Mexico. But I make this sacrifice because I want my children to study, to learn English, and have a better life than me and their father. It's not that I don't think we have a good life; it's just I want Paulo to have a better life. We provide encouragement and use our own lives as examples of how limited your options are with a poor education.

"And now I see Paulo, just like Raul was a few years ago, at this crossing in the road. He's on *el buen camino de la vida* (the good path of life) now, but some of his friends, I think, are making it hard for him to stay on it. I know that his father and I can't always help with his school learning. I still don't feel comfortable going to the school like I probably should. Already, he has more education than me and his father. I'm worried about him."

ALBERTO, PAULO'S FATHER

"Any type of job is acceptable for my son, as long as it isn't in the fields. When I was very young, I started to pick vegetables on the rancho, and I wouldn't want him to do that. Right now, Paulo is a very serious and good boy. I would like for

Paulo to get to college, but the way things are now, who knows? We don't have much money to send him to school. I know that college is not the only definition of success in life, but I look at our lives in the factories, fields, hotel kitchens—and we want our son to be a doctor, teacher, lawyer. I'd like him to live well. Really, that is the dream that one always has, that one's children succeed, that they are better off. That they do the things one was not able to do.

"His mother and I, we are very poor, but we don't give our children bad examples about anything. We behave well, hoping that they will learn to behave. If they see that we behave and are good parents, hopefully they will do the same. This will keep him away from *malas amistades* (negative friendships).

COMADRE³ ALICIA (MADRINA) AND HER SON MIGUEL

There was a knock on the door, and Paulo put down his pencil and homework assignment and went to answer it. His madrina Alicia Robles and her oldest son Miguel had arrived for dinner. Alicia greeted Sarita with a kiss on the cheek and began to help her fix dinner. Meanwhile, Miguel went over to Paulo and asked if he needed any help with his homework. Alicia and Sarita met at a Sunday church soccer game in which their husbands were playing and quickly became close friends. Alicia's oldest son Miguel was only a few years older than Raul. Because her family had been in the United States longer than Sarita's, Alicia felt like it was her job to take Sarita under her wing.

Lately, Alicia had been sending Miguel over to help Paulo with homework. Miguel was one of the first students involved in the community college outreach program and currently attends the local community college, with the scholarship from the outreach program.

As the two boys worked together, Paulo put down his pencil and rested his chin against his fist.

"This work is getting really hard—especially these word problems! I never get them right. If you're not here, I don't even have a chance. I know my mom wants to help, but she just doesn't know this kind of math. I should just quit. What did you do when you were my age?"

"I know where you're coming from, Paulo. This math work is hard, but it's important that you stick with it, stay in school, and go to college."

"I know. You're always telling me that. That lady Rachel came to school today to tell us about that program you're in."

"Hey, that's great, Paulo! Do you have the application? We can get to work on it right now. You know, it was the program that really opened up a lot of doors for me. They helped me get a job tutoring other kids when I was in high school and have kept me employed since then. And that scholarship sure helped me pay for college. Now I work at the program's partnership with the university as a researcher to help make the program better and as a college mentor. So take that application out. Let's look at it!"

When Paulo explained that he was too embarrassed to get the application form, Miguel talked to him about all the reasons he really should get involved. Miguel added that besides all the benefits for the future, there were also cute girls who often attended.

BACK AT SCHOOL

The next morning Paulo got up and went to school. He was still thinking about the community outreach program. The night before, Miguel had reawakened his desire to approach Rachel and ask for an application. As he entered the school, Paulo glanced at the quilt hanging in the lobby. His math teacher, Nancy, and another teacher had asked their students to create a picture of their hopes and dreams, then asked families in the community to sew on the different parts. Paulo's patch showed a computer video game.

"Hey Paulo!" Robert yelled as Paulo approached his math class. "Come over here!"

Paulo walked over.

"Yo. A few of us after school today—we're gonna meet up with some guys up the street. You in?" asked Robert.

Paulo hesitated, "Um . . . well, I might need to stay after school and work on some math homework. I'm failing."

"Paulo, man. Don't worry so much about your homework and school. It's not worth studying so hard. There are easier ways to get a job and money," answered Robert.

"Maybe man, yeah, I'll see," answered Paulo just as the bell rang.

Paulo breathed a sigh of relief and continued to walk to math class. Robert was starting to remind Paulo more and more of his brother Raul who had dropped out of school to hang out all day with his friends and was now on probation for stealing bikes to sell. He knew his parents suspected Raul was in a gang and saw how much they worried about his future.

NANCY BROWN, PAULO'S MATH TEACHER

Nancy Brown had been teaching math for nine years. During her first years teaching at the high school level, she had witnessed several students, especially low-income, ethnic minority, and immigrant boys leave school and its career opportunities too early. So she switched to a sixth-grade math classroom at Bay Vista Middle School a few years ago, hoping to help get youth in the community on the right track to math earlier in their school careers while they were still on "the good path." Bay Vista is a primarily Latino, low-income school with high numbers of English Language Learners who speak Spanish (see Table 4.3). Families mostly come from Mexico to work in the fields picking strawberries and lettuce, and in the packing plants.

"I see it as my job not only to teach mathematics but to also try to encourage the dreams and goals of Latino children and their families. Lately, I am concerned about Paulo. I see him spending time with some really questionable kids, and I'm worried about his math and his goals. I had to recommend him for the low-level sixth-grade math class. This upsets me because I see all the assets he brings with him. I told him that he's got a lot of potential, but that he's not working hard enough. Then he surprised me and started talking about his frustration with word problems.

Table 4.3 Bay Vista Middle School

Location	Mid-sized West Coast city, population 45,000
Grades served	6–8
Enrollment	871, 95% Hispanic
Students eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch	80%
Percent of children who do not graduate from high school	56%
Mobility rate	13%
English Language Learners	59%
Percent of sixth graders scoring at the proficient level or above on math standards-based tests	6%
Percent of sixth graders scoring at the proficient level or above on English language arts standards-based tests	9%

“It seems he has an older friend at home who helps him, but when he’s on his own, he just can’t figure it out. So now I know he’s trying, but there’s only so much I can do. There are standardized benchmarks of achievement that determine eligibility for college-prep classes in high school like Algebra 1, Geometry, and Algebra 2, and if you’re in low-level math in sixth grade, it’s really hard to place into a higher level afterwards and pass Algebra by ninth grade. I just can’t put him in these classes without him being prepared.

“I see so many times a disproportionate number of our Latino students placed in low-level math ability groups early on that sends these students towards these remedial tracks. I want to work to untrack these youths, but they need support—as well as the skills—to know they can succeed. In Paulo’s case, he hasn’t been doing his work and has made some new friends who seem to value school less than he does. It’s really affected his grades.”

RACHEL MARQUEZ, COMMUNITY COLLEGE OUTREACH PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Rachel Marquez walked into the cafeteria at lunch with her friend Nancy Brown. Rachel wanted to invite more thoughts and questions from students about applying to the program. She had directed the outreach program, *Más Allá*, since its start six years earlier. The program currently enrolls 500 low-income youth and offers tutoring by college students, Saturday academics and

summer institutes, family involvement activities, and academic guidance from sixth grade through high school to help students stay on track to college. Upon graduation from high school, students are awarded \$1,000 scholarships to attend the community college.

Más Allá also uses a research-based partnership with a local university to better understand student and family perspectives about resources and challenges to getting into and succeeding in college. In an ongoing cycle of action research, the program hosts regular meetings between program and research staff, as well as youth leaders, to identify ongoing questions and integrate data collection and analysis into program activities. Findings from the research suggested that both males and females see their peers as the greatest source of difficulty in attaining their academic and career goals. At the same time, mothers were the greatest resources. And students who continued in the program drew increasing positive support from both peers and mothers over time, a pattern that makes Rachel think that one key way her program works is by building networks of college-bound peers.

Rachel explained to Nancy the latest problematic trends developing from their research. "Younger students are more interested in program activities than older students. It's the older students who are under more pressure from peers to join gangs, ditch school, spend their time going to parties, and not attend program activities. At the same time, many of them need to work and make money. We also see more girls than boys attending activities. A lot of boys are not applying to the program in sixth grade because even then they think it looks 'uncool.' Some older boys have just stopped coming altogether. These gender patterns worry me, and I struggle with how I can enroll more boys. But one thing that is working is Daniel, who is a student teacher from the university who teaches math at the high school. He's great teaching the math enrichment class at our Saturday Academies. The attendance of the older boys has gone way up. A few bring their 'homeboys' and sit in the back of the class, and Danny just pulls them right on into the math."

Just then, Rachel caught the fleeting and embarrassed eye of a boy sitting amidst his other friends in the cafeteria.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Major Issues

The purpose of this case is to consider how schools and communities can work with Latino families to increase youth opportunities to go to college. The case is designed to help educators understand the home, school, peer group, and community factors that influence Latino youth to take *el buen camino de la vida* (the good path of life) or *el mal camino* (the bad path) and how to get back on the good path. Specifically, the case focuses on the following:

- The influence of family relationships and personal networks on youth identity
- Academic socialization, including building pathways to college

- The different ecological contexts shaping the development of youth or children in the upper range of middle childhood
- Ways that schools might link with low-income immigrant families and communities

Describing the Situation

- What crucial decision(s) must Paulo make?
- How would the different characters who have a relationship with Paulo identify the problem he faces? How are they similar and different in their assessment?
- Identify references to “pathways” and “paths” in this case. What might be some of Paulo’s different possible pathways or life trajectories to high school, college, and a career?

Exploring Contributing Factors

- What do Sarita and Alberto want for Paulo’s future? How do these expectations influence his social-emotional and academic identity?
- How does Raul (Paulo’s brother) influence Paulo?
- Describe Paulo’s relationship with his peers. What resources and challenges do they provide?
- What are some of the natural parent networks that exist for families in this community? How have they served as a resource to Paulo?
- How would you describe Paulo’s relationship with his teacher, Nancy?
- What are some of the barriers Rachel faces in her work as the program director?

Articulating Possible Next Steps

- What should Nancy do next to support the potential she sees in Paulo?
- What can the school do to develop relationships with Latino parents whose children are at risk of dropping out?
- How might Rachel and Más Allá take a bigger responsibility in helping to engage families in their children’s education?
- How might Rachel redesign the efforts to sell the program to Latino boys like Paulo?

Looking at the Bigger Picture

- What are children like during the upper range of middle childhood? How does developmental level influence home-school-community relationships and vice versa?
- How does the social and cultural position of first-generation immigrant Latino families put them at risk for unfavorable youth educational

outcomes? What school and community supports should be available to Latino families? To what extent are the supports offered in this case sufficient to keep Latino youth on the right track?

- In what ways can teachers come to better understand the cultural contexts of the students they teach and how these contexts influence the students' school experiences?
- What other institutions/community organizations can support the school in helping Paulo, and in what ways can they do this?
- Who are the "Paulos" in your school and community? What is being done to reach the needs of these families and children? Identify programs like *Más Allá* that are available in your community.

RECOMMENDED READING

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this case was originally published on the Family Involvement Network of Educators, Harvard Family Research Project, Web site: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/progress.html>
2. An earlier version of this case was originally published on the Family Involvement Network of Educators, Harvard Family Research Project, Web site: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/teaching-case/bilingual.html>
3. A *comadre* or *compadre* is a godparent (godmother or godfather) who helps parents guide their child through life and school. This person is called a *madrina* or *padrina*, for women or men, respectively, in their relation to the child.

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