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On Whose Terms?: Understanding Involvement through the Eyes of Migrant Parents
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Summary: This study examined the ways in which four immigrant/migrant families in Texas were involved in their children's education. The study found that these parents, whose children were highly successful in school, were actively engaged in supporting their children's educational development, but in ways not commonly recognized by educators and policymakers. The study explored "alternative conceptualizations of involvement activity" and examined how the concept of "parent involvement," as it is traditionally defined, limits the recognition of alternate involvement forms.

This study captured the stories told by four immigrant/migrant families' residing in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas about how they are involved in their children's educational development. The parents interviewed for the study were immigrants whose principal means of employment was migrant labor. López contends that our current definition of "parental involvement" signals a specific set of practices that have been sanctioned by the education community. As such, parents and caretakers whose involvement activities fall outside the realm of these socially specific ways get labeled as "uninvolved," "unconcerned," and "uncaring." The purpose of the study was to highlight how these families of high-performing students are already involved in school-related matters and to document and describe those practices.

A purposeful sample of four immigrant/migrant families was selected for the study on the basis of recommendations by personnel in four separate school districts. The families were identified by school personnel as those whose children were highly successful in school as defined by academic and non-academic accomplishments, achievements, and successes. All of the children in these families graduated in the top 10 percent of their graduating class. López conducted a series of observations and in-depth interviews with both immediate and extended family members in each household. Forty observations and 32 interviews were conducted over a period of six months.

Findings

López found that the parents perceived themselves as being highly involved in the educational lives of their children. In three of the four families, parents did not regularly attend such school functions as back-to-school nights, nor were they involved in PTA or in home-tutor programs. For each of the families, "involvement" was defined as teaching their children the "value of education through the medium of hard work." All of the families in the study reported taking their children at an early age to work with them in the fields and giving their children *consejos* (advice) as to the limited opportunities available if they dropped out of school. The families believed that if the children learned to work hard in the fields they would be equipped with the skills necessary to

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be successful both at work and at school. These parents perceived their involvement as transmitting this work ethic to their children.

Parent involvement in these migrant households was not defined by traditionally recognized practices such as volunteering in school and helping children with homework but by teaching their children the value of education through the lessons of migrant work. Parents in this study placed an emphasis on the skills their children learned as migrants. Rather than view migrant labor as something negative, these parents celebrated their “cultural capital,” viewing it as a powerful tool to teach their children specific lessons.

Conclusions

López concludes that if these parents were to be seen through a “traditional” involvement lens, “they would appear to be largely uninvolved in their children’s education—since there was little formal interaction between the parents and the school, and since they rarely (if ever) reinforced particular school lessons in the home” (p. 15). López states that educators and policymakers must develop parent involvement programs that are “more organic and sensitive to an expanded, as opposed to a limited, definition of involvement” (p. 16) and that capitalize on the ways that parents are already involved in the educational lives of their children.