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# Family Literacy Practices and Parental Involvement of Latin American Immigrant Mothers

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### Family Literacy Practices and Parental Involvement of Latin American Immigrant Mothers

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# Family Literacy Practices and Parental Involvement of Latin American Immigrant Mothers

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This article draws upon three years of interviews and participant observation research in the Chelsea Public Schools, to discuss the impact of the Chelsea Family Literacy Program on promoting Latin American immigrant mothers' involvement in their children's education. The authors present the voices of Latin American immigrant mothers who describe how they increased their involvement in their children's as a result of participating in Parent & Child Together (PACT) activities at their children's schools, English as a Second Language classes, and Parent Time sessions in which they shared their parenting experiences with other mothers.

**Key words:** Parental involvement, family literacy, Latin American immigrant mothers

Chelsea, Massachusetts, is a small, densely populated city of 1.8 square miles bordering northeast Boston. In 2005, the National Center for Family Literacy awarded the Chelsea Public Schools a grant to expand its Hispanic Family Literacy Initiative in the city's schools. Chelsea was chosen for this special program because it has a high percentage of Latino families, and there is a great need for literacy programs for Chelsea Public Schools parents who have limited English skills. The goals of the Chelsea Family Literacy Program were to address the needs of Latino families in Chelsea, to increase the English language and literacy skills of these families, and to support the involvement of Latino parents in their children's education. The Chelsea Family Literacy Program had four unique components: (a) Parent Time sessions that met once a week for 2 hr; (b) Parent and Child Together (PACT) sessions, in which parents visited their child's classroom twice a week for 20–30 min; (c) PACT Debriefing, in which all of the mothers at each of the five schools meet for 1 hr a week to discuss and evaluate what they observed when they visited their child's classroom during PACT Time; and (d) Adult ESL classes, in which mothers learned English literacy skills for 12 hr a week at their child's school.

Between 2005 and 2008, we were contracted by the Chelsea Public Schools to conduct an external evaluation of the Chelsea Family Literacy Program. We collected data on 55 Latin American women who participated in the Chelsea Family Literacy Program. Although the program was open to both mothers and fathers, only mothers participated in the first 2 years. A total of 73% ( $n = 40$ ) of the mothers were from Central American countries, including Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The other 15 women were from Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. In order to meet the criteria for admission into the family literacy program, at least one of the mothers' children had to be enrolled in Grades K–3 in one of five elementary schools.

To investigate the impact of the Chelsea Family Literacy Program on parental involvement among Latina mothers, we conducted random monthly participant observation of all four components (ESL, Parent Time, PACT and PACT Debriefing). We also conducted interviews with the mothers, teachers, principals, and staff in the Chelsea Public Schools. Interview participants were asked about how their goals related to family literacy, how they defined "parental involvement," and how parental involvement affects immigrant families in Chelsea. We also examined program records and quantitative program outcomes data to track increases in parental involvement and children's academic achievement (Rivera & Lavan, 2007).

This article presents examples that illustrate the impact of the Chelsea Family Literacy Program on promoting Latina mothers' involvement in their children's education. We highlight examples from the PACT and PACT Debriefing sessions because these family literacy program components were the most distinctive feature of the Chelsea Family Literacy Program, and we believe they held the greatest potential for empowering Latino mothers to advocate for their children's education.

The PACT Time helped to build strong family support for education, and these activities also helped the mothers strengthen their awareness of resources available to them as parents. The PACT activities also enhanced the Latina mothers' awareness of how their children learn. In particular, the mothers received tools and techniques to support their children's learning both in school and at home. Most important, the mothers gained the opportunity to practice these literacy skills with their children in a supportive environment.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Our research is informed by studies about Latinos and education, in particular research on Latinos and parental involvement in schools and findings about the effects of family literacy programs on Latino families. Since the 1990s, there has been a growing body of important research about Latinos and education. The edited books *Latinos and Education: A Critical Reader* (Darder, Torres, & Gutierrez, 1997), *Education in the New Latino Diaspora: Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Wortham, Murrillo, & Hamann, 2002), and *Creating Alternative Discourses in the Education of Latino/as* (Ybarra & Lopez, Eds., 2004), to name a few, all present research that aims to better understand why public school systems are failing Latinos. In these works, policy-makers, researchers, and educators suggest that experts need to increase the involvement of Latino parents in schools, as this has proven to be an effective means of addressing the low educational

attainment of Latino youth.<sup>1</sup> Also, researchers are calling for the development of more family literacy programs for Latino families, as these programs teach Latino parents English skills and help them become more involved in their children's education (Hammer & Miccio, 2004).

The problem with much of the research on Latinos and education is that most of it assumes a deficiency framework in understanding the academic achievement of Latinos, especially the literature on family literacy (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Tinkler, 2002; Whitehouse & Colvin, 2001). Also, studies of Latinos and parental involvement and Latinos and family literacy do not pay enough attention to the social construction of gender roles in Latino families or the effects of gender on parental involvement and literacy development among Latinos (Delgado-Bernal et al., 2006; Luttrell, 1996). The absence of a gender analysis is problematic because the vast majority of participants in family literacy programs are mothers, and in Latino families mothers are expected to take primary responsibility for supporting their children's education.

In their chapter "Adelante Mujer: Latina Activism, Feminism, and Empowerment," Segura and Facio (2007) criticized the research on Latino parental involvement because it

tends to be anchored in what schools perceive is important (i.e., having parents read [in English] at night to their children, check homework, monitor attendance, and attend school meetings). Schools tend not to consider that many Latino parents cannot do most of these things if they do not speak English well and or work in jobs that do not provide personal time off or even a regular work schedule. The perspectives of Latino parents—in particular Latinas who tend to be the parent in charge of monitoring children's education—are rarely integrated into school policy. (p. 301)

Family literacy programs and initiatives to increase parental involvement among Latinos are too often guided by the assumption that Latinos do not value the importance of education, and indirectly the blame is placed on Latina mothers. Researchers Ada and Zubizarreta (2001), in their chapter "The Cultural Bridge Between Latino Parents and Their Children," criticized the widely held assumptions among teachers that Latina mothers do not "place a high value on education" (p. 231):

Teachers believe that if parents had high hopes for their children, they would express them in a manner similar to European American parents. This translates into actively requesting information, participating in the [Parent-Teacher Association], and making overt references to their plans for their children's academic futures. Many Latino parents, however, have not had the opportunity for much schooling and see themselves as having a limited contribution to their children's education. Many of them believe that their role is to lay the foundation at home, and trust that the school will take care of the rest. (p. 231)<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, we found in our research that Latina mothers do face barriers to parental involvement in schooling, mostly related to their limited English proficiency and work responsibilities, but their low level of participation was sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of caring about education. In their chapter "Home Literacy Experiences of Latino Families," Hammer and Miccio (2004) argued that

<sup>1</sup>Parental involvement is a cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind Act (see U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>See Delgado-Gaitan (1990); Valdes (1996).

a parent's lack of direct involvement with the school is not an indicator of a lack of interest in their children's education, rather, it may indicate a respect for the school's authority or a lack of confidence in one's own abilities to communicate well with school personnel. (p. 308)

As we stated previously, few studies have focused exclusively on Latina mothers and parental involvement or have considered what influence gender has on parental involvement practices. One study by De La Vega (2007), reported in "Mexicana/Latina Mothers and Schools: Changing the Way We View Parent Involvement," focused on a group of Latina mothers who taught their children positive cultural values related to *respeto* (respect) and *confianza* (trust and confidence). They wanted their children to be *bien educado* (well educated). Through talking with their children about their experiences in school, and by sharing *dichos* (cultural expressions) and *consejos* (advice), the mothers in De La Vega's research demonstrated their involvement in their children's education. This study confirms findings of other studies about how Latino parents pass on important cultural values to their children, yet there is no specific gender analysis in this work.<sup>3</sup>

The working paper "Latina Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Schooling: The Role of Maternal Education and Acculturation" by Moreno and Lopez (1999) examined Latina mothers of first graders and investigated the impact of language proficiency and socioeconomic status on the women's involvement in their children's schooling. The researchers found that the mothers with higher educational levels were more involved in their children's schooling because they were more familiar with how the American educational system worked. The mothers who were less acculturated (e.g., did not speak English, had recently migrated) had higher academic expectations for their children than the mothers who were more acculturated. The authors suggested that although the less acculturated mothers faced greater social barriers and had less knowledge about the schools, "their cultural values and beliefs from their country of origin also serve[d] as a resource" (p. 8).

Our work with the Latina mothers in Chelsea, Massachusetts, confirms the findings of many of these studies on Latinos and education. The mothers in our study wanted to better understand the homework assignments given to their children, they wanted teachers to respect their children, and they wanted to have better communication with their children's schools. The women in our study did not show a lack of desire to participate in their children's education. We found high motivation and access to knowledge about the school system to be critical factors in the success of the Chelsea Family Literacy Program, especially with regard to the PACT activities.

Indeed, more research is needed that specifically analyzes Latina mothering and its relationship to parental involvement in children's education. For her book *Grassroots Warriors: Activist Mothering, Community Work, and the War on Poverty*, Naples (1998) interviewed Latina and African American mothers who were active in efforts to reform the New York City Public Schools in the 1960s. Naples's research with community activists who were African American and Latina suggested that mothering among women of color had a broader meaning than traditional conceptions about mothering. Naples wrote, "The traditional definition of mothering—nurturing work with children who are biologically or legally related and cared for within the confines of a bounded family unit—failed to capture the community workers activities and self-perceptions of this motherwork" (p. 113). Naples found that the women of color "nurtured" other people outside

<sup>3</sup>See Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, Eds. (2005).

of their homes and their immediate families, and in fact the mothers extended their mothering work to the community at large.<sup>4</sup>

Naples's analysis of mothering practices among women of color is a useful framework for understanding the experiences of the Latina mothers in our research. Like the mothers in Naples's study, the Chelsea mothers were living with extended family networks and mothering other people's children—their nieces and nephews, godchildren, and neighbors' children. Within the school context, the mothers described themselves as a community of mothers. The Parent Time component of the Chelsea Family Literacy Program was the special time when all of the mothers came together to share stories about their children and to offer suggestions about childrearing or identifying resources in the community. During Parent Time the mothers described the goals they had for their children and gave one another *consejos* just as some of the studies we just discussed have found. Because the women lived in the same community, they were studying English together, and their children attended the same schools, the Parent Time activity was a strategic space for enacting mothering activities as well as community building.

As we illustrate in the remainder of this article, the Chelsea Family Literacy Program also addressed some of the barriers faced by the women. Before they enrolled in the Chelsea Family Literacy Program the mothers in our study felt that their inability to speak or understand English presented a barrier to their participation in their children's schooling. By providing ESL classes, Parent Time, and PACT Time at the children's schools, the Chelsea Family Literacy Program offered the mothers opportunities to learn about the school system as well as resources in the community. The program's PACT component was particularly effective at increasing the mothers' knowledge about the American educational system. In the examples we present in the following sections we highlight the voices of the mothers to show how the Chelsea Family Literacy Program built upon their strengths and encouraged the mothers to become more engaged with their children's education and their own education.

*“Y AHORA ENTIENDO MAS Y LE PUEDO AYUDAR MAS”* (“AND NOW I UNDERSTAND MORE AND CAN HELP THEM MORE”)

In a study reported in “Promoting ELL [English language learners] Parental Involvement,” Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) wrote,

Parents of ELLs face daunting barriers as they try to become informed or involved in their child's school. These barriers, which include the inability to understand English, unfamiliarity with the school system, and differences in cultural norms and cultural capital, can limit parents' communication and school participation. (p. 1)

We believe the Chelsea Family Literacy Program was successful because the principals and school staff understood the barriers that immigrants face and strongly supported services for families in the community, such as the family literacy program. For example, in an interview, one of the school principals expressed high hopes for the program:

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<sup>4</sup>See Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) discussion about the concept of “Othermothers.”

We'd like the program to be on the vanguard, the forward push of our effort to involve more parents in constructive ways, to engage more parents at the school. The program fits in well with our community, and we've wanted in the past to have more ESL opportunities for our parents . . . The new twist to this program was the [PACT] time in the classroom, which I think has really brought in more parents than we ordinarily get. Because they love their children, and the opportunity to be in the classroom, with permission to be in there, and to see what's happening is a powerful idea.

In this interview the principal expressed his strong support for the program and noted that he understands that the mothers' love for their children is a motivating factor behind their involvement in the school.

In the Adult ESL classes, the teachers worked with the mothers to prepare them for visiting their children's classrooms during PACT Time. For example, the mothers were encouraged to keep a PACT journal and to think about the important things to look for in their children's classroom. We witnessed how one teacher asked the women to look around their ESL classroom: "What do you see? Where are there letters? Where are there words?" The women pointed out words on signs, posters, and books, and they discussed the meaning of these words. The teacher encouraged them to do the same thing when they visited their child's classroom. The women were also encouraged to identify a weekly common goal for PACT Time. For example, one week all of the women agreed that their goal was to look for printed words in their child's classroom. After the mothers had visited their children's classrooms they attended a PACT Debriefing session in which they compared their notes and shared the list of printed words they had seen posted on bulletin boards and on the chalkboards in the different classrooms. The mothers discussed the similarities and differences in their children's classrooms.

The PACT Debriefing sessions were a valuable learning opportunity for the mothers. We observed two mothers, Taina and Nilda,<sup>5</sup> presenting their observations to their classmates. In particular, they reported that they saw word walls in the two different classrooms they visited; these word walls were used to help develop spelling and vocabulary skills. In this particular school, all of the teachers had word walls in their classrooms. During her presentation to the mothers, Taina explained that she was confused that the word wall in her son's classroom had letters that looked different from the others: The letters were not in block print but in cursive writing. The ESL teacher explained that children in the United States learn cursive writing in the second and third grades. Many of the mothers had been in the United States for as little as 3 months, and some were not familiar with cursive writing, so this discussion helped them learn what to expect when their children moved to the next grade level. By sharing their experiences when they visited their children's classrooms, the mothers were learning from one another and increasing their understanding of the educational system in the United States. Most important, this learning process was happening in a comfortable and trusting space. Unlike in a typical workshop, in which an "expert" speaker (usually a principal) lectures parents on how to get involved in their children's education, the women in the Chelsea Family Literacy Program laughed about what they did not know, and they were not ashamed to ask questions or admit that they did not know something. The mothers supported one another in ways that affirmed their role as leaders in their families.

In another visit, we observed the ESL teacher holding up a "Progress Report Card" and explaining that the word *math* is an abbreviation for *mathematics*. These different terms were

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<sup>5</sup>All women's names have been changed to maintain their anonymity.



confusing to the Latina mothers, and the teacher joked that Americans liked to shorten things. The women laughed, and one mother commented that abbreviations made sense because Americans are so impatient. The ESL teacher pointed to the sample report card and asked the mothers, "What do you see?" One woman said, "Numbers!" but she wondered why there were strange symbols next to them. The teacher explained the meaning of the symbols 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and that the U.S. school system is divided into four marking periods. This exchange led to an interesting discussion about the differences between schools in the United States and schools in the women's home countries. One woman from Honduras explained that in her country children go to school all year long, and a woman from El Salvador said that there were five marking periods in her country's school system. One woman felt that the curriculum in Colombia was more rigorous than that in the United States because algebra is taught in the sixth grade. The comments by the mothers in this ESL class suggest that Latinas do have high standards and expectations for formal education. Two of the women were disappointed with the lack of rigor in the school curriculum and complained about the length of the school vacation in the summer. As in the research discussed earlier, the women who were less acculturated seemed more disappointed in the Chelsea schools' curriculum because they expected it to be more rigorous (Moreno & Lopez, 1999).

In an interview, Zenaída said she really liked PACT Time because she was better able to help her daughter with math. She said,

I liked it very much because mathematics here is not the same as in my native country. There are things that I did not understand before. Sometimes she [her daughter] would come home and say, "Mami, I don't understand this." And I didn't understand it either. And now, I more or less understand some of it and I can help her more.

Another mother explained,

Every once in a while in the mornings when I dropped him [her son] off, the teacher would tell me, "Look, José did not do his homework." But how could I help him? She [the teacher] said, "This is the homework he was supposed to do." But I didn't know how to help him because I did not know how to write or understand English. I did not know how to explain it to him, or say, "Son this is how you say this," because I never went to school. I only went to second grade in my country, but it's not the same thing you learn here.

The majority of the women said that they had difficulty helping their children with their homework, and it was especially challenging for mothers with children in Grade 3 and higher. Thus, PACT Time helped the mothers improve their capacity to provide assistance with homework. Estella enjoyed PACT Time because

I like to bring a notebook and pencil to take notes so I can more or less have an idea what they are doing and what they are teaching them. Then if she [her daughter] has a question, she says, "Mami, look at this." And I know how to help her.

Another mother, Leticia, also described how visiting her child's classroom gives her skills that she can use to help her son:

I feel good about going to my son's classroom because I learn how the class is going so I can help him with the homework he brings home in the afternoon. And talking to the teacher, she explains what is happening. Sometimes I have a problem with him, or he has a problem with another kid, but

I always know what is going on in his classroom. And that's what I really like. And I learn because what is assigned to him it helps me be able to help him with the class.

Besides fostering the mothers' abilities to help their children with homework, the PACT Time also offered other important insights for the mothers into how their children are doing in school. For example, Lupe said that she enjoys the PACT Time because she can observe how her daughter is doing in comparison to her classmates. Lupe explained that the report card does not tell her how her daughter compares to other children. She said that it was only through firsthand observation that she realized that her daughter was falling behind in her reading skills. During a PACT Time visit, Lupe heard her daughter reading aloud in a group of children who were also reading aloud. When Lupe heard how well the other children read, she got a sense that her daughter was not reading as well as the other children. The PACT Time gave her the opportunity to observe that her daughter was struggling with her reading compared to other students.

Some of the mothers described how going to their child's classroom also helped them learn English and other literacy skills. For example, Gina explained,

Every time I go I feel more confident in myself when I understand what she is learning. It helps me a lot too . . . My daughter is so happy when I come to her class. "Oh, Mami is learning the same things I am learning."

This mother's comments illustrate how many of the women appreciated the opportunity to participate in their children's education. The mothers felt like they were role models for their children. The mothers also became more self-confident in their own ability to learn.

Most important, all of the mothers we interviewed said that their children were very happy when they visited their classroom during PACT Time. For example, one mother named Celia said,

I am really happy to participate in the [PACT] classes and to be with her and see how she [her daughter] is learning. In other years, I was not involved with my children in their school, never. And now I like it because the children like it too. They like it when the parents come to be with them and they see that they are learning too . . . Oh, yes, she gets really excited and asks me, "Mami when is it your turn to come?" The other kids get to know you and they feel comfortable that you are there.

As a result of the PACT activity the mothers felt more connected to their own and other children. They understood what is expected of their children on a regular basis, and they got to know their children's teachers and their classmates. Because the mothers attended their ESL classes at their children's schools, the majority of the families went to school together. Many of the mothers said that as they dropped off their children in the mornings, their children asked them when they were coming to visit their class. One mother described how her daughter expected her to visit her class every Wednesday, and she cried when her mother missed one week because she was sick. Clearly, the mothers' relationships with their children were strengthened by the experience of PACT Time.

The mothers in the Chelsea Family Literacy Program were the only mothers in the five schools that participated in PACT Time, so they were a special group of parents. A teacher liaison worked with the teachers in the schools and introduced the teachers to the goals of the program. The teacher liaison also provided training to the teachers on how to involve the mothers when they visited their classrooms. Thus, the children's teachers understood the important goals of the program and welcomed the mothers to their classrooms. One teacher told us,

When the parent comes in the classroom, I think that's a very successful part of the program too. I loved having the parents come in too, and it wasn't for a very long time, which was also wonderful. Because they were spending 15 to 20 minutes and it wasn't too long, the parents in no way were an intrusion. It was nice because it gave me a chance to see the parent, the child was very excited, both of the kids were very excited that their parents were here and got to sit next to them. I loved having the parents come to my classroom. It was nice to see them, nice to see them involved.

Similar sentiments were expressed by a teacher at another school:

I have noticed with the parent that comes into my room, she's a lot more comfortable in the school setting now, kind of jumps right in, obviously she knows our routine and that helps, but she seems to be more comfortable with the literacy activities that we are doing, and that's great. The children seem to be doing better. Their achievement has improved.

The teachers and principals wanted the Chelsea Family Literacy Program to help immigrants adapt to a new country, so the schools made concerted efforts to provide the mothers with information about what was happening at the school. For example, the school newsletters were translated into Spanish, and translators were available for open houses. One teacher told us that the program

help[s] with situations that arise being new to the country, being new to the school system. A lot of them had first graders and so a lot of the parents had questions about how this particular school functions, the rules, the regulations.

She said it was important to also "make sure the parents are comfortable, the parents are aware, the parents know what's going on with their child's education."

*"EL PROGRAMA NOS AYUDA ENVOLUCRARNOS ADENTRO Y FUERA DE LA ESCUELA"* ("THE PROGRAM HELPS US BECOME INVOLVED INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE SCHOOL")

The Chelsea Family Literacy Program helped the parents become more comfortable in the school environment and more confident advocates for their families' educational needs. One teacher we interviewed said,

My parents that were involved in the beginning were being very shy and wanting to knock on the door. You know, it was kind of scary. Now, it is just like, "Come on in!" Now, they feel comfortable and they seem excited about how they have seen the kids progress . . . having the PACT Time and being able to come in, it really helped and they really aren't afraid anymore to ask any questions. You know, if something happens in class, that communication line is there.

Communication between the mothers, their children, and school personnel was also improved as a result of the program.

We observed how the lines of communication were strengthened when we visited the program one day and a few parents were seated at a large table, meeting with one of the principals and their ESL teacher. The meeting had been requested by some of the mothers who had complaints about the school bus schedules and how their children were being mistreated by the school bus driver. Margarita said that the bus driver gestured disrespectfully to the children like they were animals.

The principal, who spoke in Spanish, told a story about his travels in Mexico and the cultural conflicts he experienced when he used the wrong hand gesture to describe how tall his father was. He explained how in Mexico his hand gesture was only used to describe farm animals, not people. The principal cited another example of cultural conflict when he described how villagers would wave to him and he waved back, not realizing they were inviting him to come over. The parents laughed at these examples. A discussion ensued about the different ways that hand gestures are used to describe humans and animals in various parts of Latin America, and the women from Honduras, Mexico, and El Salvador compared cultural symbols. In this instance the principal was not Latino, but the fact that he spoke Spanish was important in establishing trust and dialogue with the mothers. As we discussed previously, Hammer and Miccio's (2004) research found that communication with their children's schools is a major barrier for immigrant parents who are not proficient in English. We found that in our research, the Chelsea Public Schools effectively addressed this barrier by employing bilingual staff and by providing ESL classes on site for the mothers.

In all of our interviews, the mothers were extremely appreciative of the program, and they described how the Chelsea Family Literacy Program had made a positive difference in their lives. Margarita stated how the program "makes us more involved inside and outside of school." She mentioned that she felt more confident speaking to her children's teachers now and that the mothers are "*familia*." One teacher supported this idea and described how the women in the Chelsea Family Literacy Program were like a "community." She explained,

They all come and eat breakfast with their kids in the morning. I have morning duty, so I pass through the cafeteria at some point. A lot of it has to do with the fact that they are walkers. Their children don't come in on the bus. So they come in and walk their children to school and sit there and have breakfast with their children. It's sort of this whole table of our students and these moms. And they sit there and they are surrounded by all the kids. All the kids know who their moms are. Again, they are a little community. The kids look up to them and the kids feel comfortable with these moms and they are comfortable with each other. The teachers know who they are and they say hi to each other. They get up and they leave together, and they come to all of the school activities.

Indeed, our research suggests that a community of mothers was developed and that the mothers became more involved in their children's schooling. The mothers who participated in the Chelsea Family Literacy Program felt empowered by their special role in the PACT Time component and the strong bonds they developed with their children. The women developed friendships with other mothers through their experiences learning English together. And the mothers experienced a sense of solidarity with other mothers when they shared their mothering experiences in Parent Time and PACT Debriefing sessions.

The program not only transformed the mothers who participated in it but also improved the relationships between the schools and the mothers. For example, one of the principals we interviewed believes that the Chelsea Family Literacy Program successfully involved mothers and changed the "culture" of his school. He said,

The culture of our school is very much "open door" from the office to the classrooms. Teachers are very accustomed to having other people come into the room . . . that's not always the case in every school. There are places where you are trespassing if you enter a teacher's classroom. In our school, teachers see that culture as a place where we learn from one another, and how to improve the school is part of it.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Chelsea Family Literacy Program had a positive impact on promoting Latina mothers' involvement in their children's education. Programs like the Chelsea Family Literacy Program can serve as an important intervention in addressing low educational attainment in the Latino community. One of the mothers, Sonia, captured the experiences of many of the Latinas we studied when she said,

I like to go to the children's classrooms. It helps parents get a little more involved in the development of their child in school. Many parents just send their kids to school and when they come home they tell them, "Do your homework." But they don't see what the children are doing in class, or the methods the teachers are applying in the classroom, or the rules, nothing. So this is a way to involve parents with their children in school.

We found that the program's activities were building strong family support for education, as evidenced by Patricia, who said,

I think the program helped me because before, when we were at home, my daughter would say I don't understand this math, or these words, and we would look in the dictionary. Now, I remember what the teacher said that this word belongs here, and doesn't go here, and we begin to do the homework. So I understand, even if just a little bit, and it helps me relate with my children. When I didn't know I felt distant from them. The program brings us together.

The Latina mothers in our study had increased awareness about what their children are learning, and they shared strategies to support their children's learning both in school and at home. The women also had the opportunity to share information and new ideas about their children's education. The mothers also developed stronger bonds of support and community solidarity as a result of their participation in the program.

We strongly believe that if schools want to increase parental involvement among Latinas, they need to create more programs like the Chelsea Family Literacy Program (Zarate, 2007). However, these family literacy programs should focus as much on meeting the needs of the mothers as on their children's needs (Rivera, 2008). Carmack (1992), in her article "Women and Illiteracy: The Need for Gender Specific Programming in Literacy Education," criticized the goals of some family literacy programs because they

focus on mothers teaching children to read and write in order to break the cycle of illiteracy. In so doing, the programs subordinate the importance for women of literacy skills as a way out of confining roles and relationships within the family and society. (p. 180)

The Chelsea Family Literacy Program was effective because in addition to having PACT Time, it met the women's educational needs in the ESL classes that were offered at their children's schools, and it addressed mothers' emotional and social needs during the Parent Time sessions.

Caspe (2003), in her report "Family Literacy: A Review of Programs and Critical Perspectives," criticized the research on family literacy because it has a "silent gendered discourse" (p. 2).<sup>6</sup> Our research suggests that experts need to better understand the experiences of Latina mothers who participate in family literacy programs, what motivates them to become

<sup>6</sup>Also see Luttrell (1996) and Cuban and Hayes (1996).

involved in their children's education, and how to address the barriers they face in participating in their children's schooling. There is a need for more research that questions whether gender makes a difference in Latinas' formation of aspirations for their children's education and whether (or why) Latinas feel that they are the parent who is most responsible for ensuring that their children receive a good education. It is our hope that the voices of the mothers we presented in this article will inspire others to examine these issues more deeply.

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