

**Te Acompaño: Trust, Engagement, and Belonging in the Wake of School Reform**

by

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## Abstract

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Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Terri S. Wilson

In this critical ethnography, I explore how family engagement approaches in a largely Latino, African American, and immigrant neighborhood in Denver are shaped by racialized school and urban reform, and the community's fractured relationships with its schools. While scholars have documented the harmful effects of market-oriented reforms in urban communities, I shift our focus to what happens *after* such reforms have been implemented. Largely conducted at a newcomer school of choice, this study explores how school leaders have built relationships and repositioned themselves in this context of distrust, especially through parent engagement initiatives with immigrant residents.

Through participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, I first draw on Schultz's (2019) framework of distrust to show how school restructuring efforts and gentrification pressures have perpetuated fragmentation and trauma in this marginalized community. In order to understand this fragmentation, I point to the influence of culture, language, and migration in shaping racialized divisions. I then demonstrate how engagement is a medium through which the school attempts to rebuild trust and build a sense of belonging, especially for newcomer students and families. Drawing on *acompañamiento* (Sepúlveda, 2011), I focus on the school's principal, who I argue functioned as a "border broker" in helping families find a sense of belonging in the school and community. Despite these benefits, I document how—in a community experiencing racialized divisions—these *pedagogies of acompañamiento*

may be perceived as exacerbating divisions. Yet, I highlight the potential for *acompañamiento* in building cross-cultural solidarity and caution against efforts to “operationalize” these pedagogies. Centering our participatory action research with a group of Latin American immigrant mothers, I argue that shared reflection contributed to *autoformación* (Dyrness, 2016), which paved the way for transformation outside of avenues tied to structural change and institutional policy. I end this study with a discussion on the implications for educators, district, and researchers considering how to address engagement and building trust in marginalized and fragmented communities.

## **Dedication**

*To all families in the diaspora, struggling yet creating radical possibilities for belonging.*

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## Introduction

In one of the most controversial education reform moves in Denver, school district leaders announced in 2010 that Montbello High School would close. This largely Latino and African American high school graduated its last class in May of 2014 after 34 years of serving the Montbello neighborhood. While the district considered several options for the academically struggling school—including staffing changes and turnaround processes—the final decision was closure. This decision was met with protests, as community members fought to save their beloved high school. In its place would be three schools housed on one campus: the charter school Strive-Montbello, along with two district “innovation schools,”<sup>1</sup> the Denver Center for International Studies at Montbello (DCISM) middle and high schools, and Noel Arts. These schools were founded on the same campus as Montbello High School in 2012, two years before its closing, making Montbello High a co-location site even before the closure of the comprehensive high school. These options were not a part of the education vision for many Montbello residents. Indeed, many felt that this structure directly challenged their vision of a unified community, anchored around a comprehensive neighborhood school. For example, Donna Garnett, a community leader, shared, “Many view the dismantling of Montbello High School...as the destruction of one of the most unifying institutions in the community” (Siebrase, 2017).

In effect, Garnett, and other community activists charged that the local school district, the Denver Public Schools (DPS), was “dismantling” their school, and enforcing unwanted changes in their neighborhood. Over the past decade, Denver Public Schools has initiated a range of

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<sup>1</sup> Innovation schools are granted some of the flexibility of a charter school, in terms of curriculum, scheduling and hiring, but are managed by the district. (CDE, 2019).

market-based and accountability-based reforms in an effort to raise district schools' academic performance. Each school is ranked on the district's "school performance framework," which measures student achievement, growth and other outcomes. Chronically low-performing schools have been faced with several "turnaround" options, including converting into a charter school, converting into an "innovation school" or closure. For the district, closing ineffective schools—and creating new ones—was seen as a key strategy to provide students with better educational opportunities, and improve academic achievement district-wide (Wiley, 2017).

However, such reforms have disproportionately impacted lower-income communities and communities of color, including Montbello. Under such reforms, several of Montbello's traditional neighborhood schools were closed, school choice policies were put into place, and smaller charter and innovation schools were founded on shared campuses, creating co-located schools. District officials claim that these schools are improving the educational opportunities for Montbello and that students in the Far Northeast are getting a better education now than before the phase-out of Montbello High (Asmar, 2018b).

But instead of welcoming these changes as necessary interventions, residents have been concerned over the loss of traditional neighborhood schools and the perceived loss of control over their children's educational opportunities. As Brandon Pryor, a local community activist, noted, "Black and brown communities have been ignored as a whole and targeted for these Frankenstein experiments, like co-location" (Asmar, 2018a). Jennifer Bacon, a member of the Denver Board of Education, elected in 2017 to represent Denver's Far Northeast (including Montbello), also stressed the importance of collaboration with residents and the need for community control. As she wrote in a social media post, "For too long, DPS has had an adversarial relationship with community. Our work starts and ends with students, families, and

community partnerships” (Bacon, 2018). For these individuals and for many other long-time residents, the closure of Montbello High and the opening of several small charter and innovation schools in its place signaled the disappearance of a community legacy for Montbello and for community-led visions in education.

Yet, this notion of a “community-led” or a community driven vision is contested and complex. Recent demographic shifts have resulted in more Mexican and Central American immigrant families moving into Montbello, a long standing African American neighborhood. In addition, the neighborhood has experienced gentrification pressures, destabilizing residents and exacerbating tensions across lines of race and class. Gentrification looms large over Montbello, as rising housing prices in other parts of the city, and the displacement of many Latino and African American families in Denver continues to shape the neighborhood. Indeed, journalists and community organizations have documented how Montbello residents are increasingly wary of outside investors creating unwanted changes in their neighborhood and potentially causing future displacement (Roberts, 2019; Siebrase, 2017). With new improvements to the community on the way—such as a new community center—residents are calling for the plans to reflect local visions and serve existing residents, not outside interests and those threatening to gentrify the neighborhood. As Garnett, a community leader, stated, “we don’t want the people who created this vision to be displaced. We want it to be...where they get to enjoy the benefits” (Hernandez, 2018, p. 8).

Racial divisions also play a role in the neighborhood landscape. As previously mentioned, demographic changes have brought relatively new Mexican and Central American immigrant communities into a largely African American neighborhood. Because of the historical presence of African Americans in Montbello, many of the most vocal activists protesting district

reform strategies and the loss of neighborhood schools have been African American. When the traditional Montbello High School was closed, many African Americans felt they lost a cornerstone of the Montbello community, and a legacy of their neighborhood. Indeed, African American parents and community members felt that their children have been forgotten in the school system and their needs have not been met. For example, in an article about Black parents' advocacy for education in Montbello and the Far Northeast, Hasira Ashemu—a widely known African American activist in Denver—argues that Black students are exposed to education reforms that other students otherwise do not experience. He explains, “Montbello is essentially the projects for education, these are circumstances that white people would never tolerate their children having to endure” (Tellis, 2018).

Many newly arrived Mexican and Central American parents and community members, however, do not have the same historical and emotional ties to Montbello High School. In contrast, they are more likely to have ties to the current small schools—like DCISM— that replaced the larger high school. Additionally, these parents are less likely to be involved in the educational activism organized by African American residents and may not share the same priorities as those expressed in recent initiatives from African American residents. This has created a schism among stakeholders pushing for education change in Montbello. African American parents now push for equity specifically for African American children in the district. In addition, some local activists created an African American-focused charter school, in some ways, taking up the reform tools they previously protested. “Warriors for High Quality Schools,” a Montbello organization consisting of Black parents and sports coaches, was approved to run an innovation school structured after HBCU institutions (Asmar, 2019b). In effect, after protesting the school choice policies that led to the closure of their neighborhood school, these activists

have used school choice policies to implement their vision of quality education for African American students. There is evidence that African American activism in Montbello, and in the larger Denver area, has had considerable impact. In February of 2019, the Denver School Board passed a resolution, largely written by Jennifer Bacon and many activists from the Far Northeast, that requires every school in Denver to “to boost the success of black and African-American students by embracing their strengths rather than focusing on the challenges they face” (Asmar, 2019a). In contrast, I have found little evidence of Latino families in Montbello leading such discernable or strong movements in the district or neighborhood for educational change. Even though there is evidence that both Latino and African American parents have strong critiques of school choice policies, very few parents or community leaders have created cross-racial coalitions to work together or protest education reforms in Montbello.

Five years later, the loss of the neighborhood high school continues to resonate in Montbello. However, the effects of this loss extend beyond anger over the school closure. The loss of this high school encapsulated a moment where race, gentrification, school choice and accountability policies came to a head in Montbello. The closure of the school signaled a deepening distrust between Montbello residents and their schools, a pattern that continues to shape interactions today. Currently, both the district and Montbello residents seek to move forward, forging common aims for Montbello schools. Many community members, particularly African American residents, have continued to call for a return to a comprehensive school like the former Montbello High School. And in June of 2020, the district officially announced they had “heard” the community and were pledging to return to a comprehensive high school (Asmar, 2020). However, as a part of this process, three small schools—two of them located on the

Montbello campus—including the Denver Center for International Studies at Montbello (DCISM), the site of my dissertation—would close.

My dissertation positions Montbello as a particularly vivid case of how neoliberal urban policies, working in tandem with education reforms, have reshaped communities, exacerbated racial divisions and deepened distrust in public institutions. While Montbello is a powerful example of such forces, it is by no means unique. Scholars have demonstrated that many large comprehensive schools in urban areas are facing similar pressures and trends (Garnett, 2014; Scott & Holme, 2016). As Diane Ravitch has argued, “Communities of color have been unjustly targeted for school closings. These closings...shatter and destabilize communities” (cited in Garnett, 2014, p. 296). In New York, for example, Noguera (2015) demonstrated how school choice reforms have disproportionately targeted and impacted communities of color. Similarly, Dixson et al. (2015) describe how school closures reinforced patterns of racial segregation and white supremacy in New Orleans. Other cities—including Washington, Oakland, Chicago, Philadelphia and others—have weathered similar education reforms, particularly in communities of color. These reforms are often connected to changes in housing, urban “revitalization,” and gentrification (Lipman, 2011).

In my dissertation, I explore these racialized policies and practices through a critical ethnographic study of the Montbello neighborhood and its fractured relationships with its schools. While many scholars have documented the harmful effects of market-oriented reforms in urban communities, I shift our focus to what happens *after* such reforms have been implemented. While I focus on DCISM, I explore how school leaders—like Mr. Silva, the principal at DCISM, have attempted to build relationships and reposition themselves in this context of distrust, especially through parent engagement initiatives with Montbello residents



who identify as immigrants. Likewise, I examine how parents and community leaders perceive such efforts and approach renegotiating relationships with schools in the neighborhood. I also point to what Latin American immigrants feel they are losing with the proposed closure of DCISM and the return to a comprehensive high school. I show how continuing school restructuring efforts, meant to heal a community, have also perpetuated fragmentation and trauma in this marginalized community. In this way, DCISM is wedged between old and new versions of comprehensive schools in Montbello. An understanding of DCISM's struggle to participate in building a sense of community in the neighborhood must be embedded within the history and context of the community.

My research was shaped by a pilot study I conducted at DCISM during the 2018-2019 school year. In this study, I explored the school's efforts to build parent and community engagement. I documented deep patterns of distrust and tensions experienced by school leaders who were asked to simultaneously balance district demands (to raise test scores) against fragile, emerging relationships with parents and community leaders (who often had different, or multi-faceted, aims for their new neighborhood schools). From my initial research, I developed research questions that point to the potential tensions involved in rebuilding trust and relationships in the aftermath of reform. These questions are:

1. In the wake of unpopular reforms and gentrification pressures, how do community fragmentation and distrust impact school-community relationships?
2. In the face of distrust in the community and schools, how do parents, school leaders, and community members rebuild trust and relationships? What strategies do school and parent leaders use to negotiate those relationships?
3. How do school leaders, and other key members of school staff, try to build common aims for parent engagement in a context of accountability era reforms?
4. How do school leaders and faculty navigate building a sense of community in a fragmented and divided Latino and Black neighborhood?

## **Why Parent Engagement?**

I explore these questions through a focus on *parent engagement* opportunities in DCISM, a small Montbello middle and high school. This focus on parent engagement allows me to first explore how parents negotiate their new landscape of school options (a landscape shaped, in important ways, by both gentrification pressures and market-oriented district policies). More centrally, I am interested in exploring what comes ‘after’ such unpopular policies are implanted. Here, parent engagement initiatives have been the locus for efforts to rebuild relationships in Montbello. In effect, local school leaders and teachers are charged—perhaps unfairly—with rebuilding relationships with parents and community members, in the wake of widespread distrust with the school district. How do they forge, negotiate and sustain such relationships? Here, parent engagement offers an essential point of entry into my research questions. Several policy and local contexts have also led me to this entry point.

First, parent engagement is also the focus of multiple levels of education policy. Relationship-building and engagement with parents is often positioned as part of accountability and equity efforts. National policy does so through Title 1, which requires its schools to provide supports and programs for parental involvement. This includes building capacity for involvement, which is meant to “ensure effective involvement of parents and to support a partnership among the school involved, parents, and the community to improve student academic achievement” (US Department of Education, 2005). Local policy and practice also connect partnerships and relationship-building with parent engagement. DPS includes in their policy, ‘Regulation for Family Engagement’ that “Schools will provide multiple opportunities to make individual and positive connections with families to build relationships,” (Denver Public Schools, 2016). Other district initiatives have stressed the importance of building relationships

with families and community members. For example, DPS's Office of Family and Community Engagement (FACE), notes that part of its mission is to focus on "Community Engagement Strategy and Advocacy," in order to "engage the community by providing information and opportunities for community collaboration and provide venues for constructive dialogue around DPS initiatives" (The Commons, n.d.). In another statement, FACE notes that they are "dedicated to developing educated, engaged, and empowered parents and staff who are partners in creating great schools in every neighborhood where Every Child Succeeds" and that "everyone benefits when parents and families are involved in their children's education" (Family and Community Engagement, n.d.).

An example of an initiative that falls under this category was the discussion about a new building for Montbello's co-located schools. Denver Public Schools noted that to rebuild relationships after the Montbello High School closure, they must involve the community in this important development. As Donna Garnett, a local leader, summarized, "The leaders from the DPS side of the process express the mistakes that have been made on their part and our community and our students have gotten the raw end of the deal. They promise this is a new day" (Garnett, 2019, p. 3). She explained that she is cautious, but eager to embark in discussions about the new building "so long as the community is leading the way...DPS, please don't let us down" (p. 3). A local parent and activist, Brandon Pryor also explains that this dialogue around the DPS initiative is an "opportunity to reimagine what that campus looks like," Pryor said. "And it's an opportunity for community to steer the conversation" (Asmar, 2019c).

Second, what counts as parent engagement is contested. On one hand, the "lack" of parent engagement in district-directed or controlled processes has been positioned as a problem. For example, in a committee that was designed to decide on which charter management

organization would be selected to manage a recently closed traditional elementary school in Montbello, none of the eight parent and community members on the committee attended the final meeting. Two members of the committee, when reporting to the Denver school board, diagnosed this absence as a “dearth of parent involvement” and as a “limitation” (Asmar, 2017b). Yet, parent activism and protest—outside of district decision-making processes—are rarely positioned as valuable forms of “parent engagement.” How parents are positioned by the district—as, say, empowered “consumers” and “choosers” of educational options, or “partners in creating great schools,”—may not be how *parents* understand what engagement should look like. Indeed, the lack of participation in district planning committees, and concurrent calls for more community-led opportunities, illustrates that “parent engagement” may be a powerful point of entry to explore relationship-building among different groups of stakeholders and the broader power dynamics of education in the Montbello community.

It is important to acknowledge that this case/study cannot be easily generalized to portray the needs and perspectives of all parents in Montbello, nor all Montbello residents. I chose DCISM—and the focus on Latino and immigrant families—deliberately to complicate the most recognized and heard instantiations of Montbello neighborhood identity. Therefore, this study of engagement foregrounds a perspective not heard as clearly in broader Montbello school interactions, potentially shedding light on complications that may arise in the formation of the new comprehensive school and future engagement efforts meant to include “community”.

### **Note on Language**

Although widely used in academic writing, in this study, I do not use the term “Latinx” to describe the parents or students in Montbello. I made this decision based on my fieldwork; I never heard the mothers in the research group or other parents I engaged with use the term. I

only heard two DCISM faculty members use the term—Ms. Gray and Ms. Danvers, two administrators. As described later in this study, the mothers in the PAR group also rejected the term “Brown”, widely used in other Montbello conversations around race. Indeed, one mother explicitly stated, “I prefer Latina” to identify herself (fieldnotes, December 5, 2020). Because of this, I carefully selected Latina/o or the nationality of the individual—another form of identification I commonly heard—when referring to the participants in my writing of this study. Similarly, I decided to use both African American and Black based on the ways Montbello residents chose to identify. I commonly heard both terms and, therefore, use them interchangeably.

### **Structure of Dissertation**

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I frame my study around three interrelated areas of literature: research on how gentrification has reshaped urban communities, studies of market-oriented education reforms, and how such patterns have created—and disrupted—opportunities for parent engagement in education. I also outline the theoretical resources that guide this study. Particularly relevant to my study are concepts of trust/distrust, such as Schultz’s (2019) framework of distrust, which allow me to analyze the multiple forms and instantiations of distrust left in the wake of school reforms in Montbello. I then describe how Hong’s (2011) and Ishimaru’s (2020) approaches to engagement, which pay particular attention to context and equitable collaboration, are an entryway to studying the relationships and interactions in Montbello schools. Also critical to my study are Borderlands concepts, such as Sepúlveda’s (2018) *pedagogies of acompañamiento*, that allow me to theorize some of the practices that educators employ to forge relationships with families, and create humanizing spaces, even amid structural constraints. Finally, I describe how I conceptualize belonging and the struggle to

belong, particularly for immigrant families in schools. These different areas of literature—and theoretical frameworks—allow me to describe the racialized patterns of debates about educational control.

These theoretical frameworks also guide my methodological approach in this study. In Chapter 2, I outline the critical ethnographic approach that shaped this case study, which explores the contested relationships between DCIS Montbello and its parents and community stakeholders. Guided by similar ethnographic approaches (Dyrness, 2011), my study draws on a variety of qualitative data sources, including participant observation, interviews, document and artifact analysis, and participatory methods. Because of my relationship with the principal of DCISM—I am his daughter—my exploration of these issues is indelibly shaped by my own positionality in this study. In this chapter, I outline my positionality, describing how my relationship to the principal at the school may affect my relationships with other members in the community, how I am positioned by participants, and broader power dynamics within the study.

In Chapter 3, I explore the wider neighborhood context of this case. I explore the question, “Who is Montbello?” This is a complex question, and any answer must include a deep understanding of the neighborhood’s history, efforts to establish Montbello’s identity, the centrality of neighborhood schools, and the fragmentation of the community. I document the divisions that affect both the neighborhood and its schools. Although often described as racial divisions, I advocate for the recognition of culture, language, and migration, in order to understand fragmentation in this community. Throughout this chapter, I show how Montbello has negotiated questions about its identity through its schools; debates about educational reform are intimately connected to debates about community identity. In Chapter 4, I build on these neighborhood dynamics to explore a central issue: distrust between community residents and the

school district. These dynamics of distrust continue to shape how residents engage with local schools. I document how community fragmentation and distrust work in conjunction to weaken the possibilities for a unified Montbello vision for their neighborhood schools, and consequently, for their community.

In Chapter 5, I turn our focus to parent engagement practices, and how schools negotiate such engagement amid this context of distrust. I delineate how differing concepts of engagement held by district leaders, school leaders, and parents and community members lead to barriers for collaboration. I particularly highlight how the principal negotiated the different aims that district officials and community members had for engagement. Throughout, I argue that engagement is a medium through which schools and the district attempt to rebuild trust and, in the case of DCISM, build a sense of belonging, especially for newcomer students and their families.

As I delve deeper into the context within DCISM, in Chapter 6, I describe the principal's approach to designing engagement opportunities. I profile two parent decision-making spaces created by the principal and conceptualize these as efforts to forge more equitable partnerships with parents. I also draw on *pedagogies of acompañamiento* as I focus on the role played by the school's principal, who I argue functioned as a "border broker" in helping families find a sense of belonging in the school and community. I argue that the power of these pedagogies lies not in efforts to "operationalize" engagement practices, but in prioritizing the humanizing interactions and bonds between individuals who share border-crossing experiences. In Chapter 7, I document how—in a community experiencing racialized divisions—these *pedagogies of acompañamiento* may be perceived and felt as exacerbating divisions. Yet, I highlight the potential for *acompañamiento* in building cross-cultural solidarity. I argue that this potential can be realized through building a team of border brokers that develop spaces for shared reflection. In Chapter 8,

I argue that a sense of belonging can be created *through* research. I describe how our participatory action research (PAR) group, Madres de DCIS, challenged power dynamics around parent engagement and established strong collaborative relationships with school leaders and teachers. But as the work shifted towards district-led policies around the new comprehensive high school, our group also faced daunting challenges and barriers that threatened to demoralize the mothers. I describe how the mothers responded to these challenges through collective reflection and contend that their learning through dialogue paves the way for transformation outside of avenues tied to structural change and institutional policy.

I end this study with a discussion on the implications for educators and districts considering how to address engagement and building trust in marginalized and fragmented communities. Finally, I discuss the methodological considerations for researchers taking on studies of school-community relationships.



## **Chapter I: Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter, I locate my study within a tradition of critical studies of parent engagement. These studies call for the contextualization of schools and their practices, as well as challenge deficit narratives of parents. My research contributes to conversations about parent engagement in education, educational reform, and urban restructuring. In this chapter, I provide a review of these intersecting areas of literature. I then turn to several key theoretical frameworks that inform my exploration of parent engagement practices in the Montbello neighborhood. First, I draw on frameworks of distrust that highlight how social interactions and relationships are impacted and complicated by layering factors that lead to distrust. I then turn to approaches to parent engagement that highlight equitable collaboration and explore how trust may be built through engagement efforts. My study also seeks to foreground and explore the racialized dynamics of this distrust and trust building. To illuminate these patterns, I draw on Borderlands and Chicana/feminist theories to analyze community-building in Montbello.

### **Parent Engagement**

Scholars have long documented approaches to parent engagement in American schools. According to Hurtig and Dyness (2011), “*A Nation at Risk* emphasized the primacy of parent participation in improving the nation’s public educational system in general and pointed with particular concern to low rates of parent participation in poor and minority schools” (p. 532). This government report—and its focus on a lack of parent involvement in less-advantaged schools—fueled the perception that marginalized parents were problems in their children’s educational success. Scholars have identified how studies using “culture of poverty,” assimilationist, and other deficit-frameworks perpetuated the view of parents as “lacking” engagement, even in well-intentioned studies meant to benefit disadvantaged parents (Valencia

& Solórzano, 2004; Erickson, 1987). By the 1990's, this discourse became the mainstream form of understanding traditionally marginalized parents' roles in education. Of particular relevance to this study, the view that marginalized parents do not participate in engagement opportunities because they are not interested or don't care about their child's education masks real and significant barriers that limit parent participation (Hong, 2019; Olivos & Mendoza, 2013; Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). Such barriers—when rendered invisible—only exacerbate (often false) narratives of disengaged and apathetic parents.

A growing number of critics have pushed for moving beyond a “school-centric” view of engagement that centers school missions and goals and may look past parent and community visions for education. In recent years, scholars have advanced more expansive and critical notions of engagement that position parents as equal stakeholders in decision-making. I point to some of these frameworks for engagement in the following section on theoretical resources. Furthermore, anthropologists of education and critical ethnographers have produced ethnographic portraits and narratives that reveal transformational potential in examining “‘parent involvement’ as a cultural process that produces educative roles, relationships and inequalities” (Hurtig & Dyrness, 2011, p. 533). For example, Villenas’ (2001) work highlighted Latina mothers’ values about education as they lamented the lack of a moral education in U.S. schools. Villenas documented the perspectives and experiences of these mothers; values that pushed back on how the school positioned the mothers. Similarly, Barajas-Lopez and Ishimaru (2016) argue that “holding a “place” for the complex understandings of nondominant families can open expansive possibilities for transforming educational systems toward racial equity” (p. 1). From this position, I draw on critical ethnographic tools to analyze how spaces for transforming educational systems can be created through opportunities for parent engagement.

### *Parent Engagement in Context of School Choice*

School choice policies have influenced parent engagement practices across the country. Scholars have argued that neoliberal reforms have dominated the national educational landscape to the extent that neoliberal policies, practices, and discourses have become hegemonic (Lipman, 2011). The neoliberal context in education and in larger society has fueled the marketization of education, where Lipman (2011) argues that, “cities have become the policy labs for neoliberal experiments in urban entrepreneurship, marketization, and competition” (p. 219). Lipman (2011) enumerates some of these experiments: “closing public schools to turn them over to private management organizations, tying competitive teacher pay to student test scores, and expanding privately run but publicly funded charter schools and ‘choice’ while ‘steering education at a distance’ through testing regimes and standards” (p. 221).

Scholars have demonstrated how these neoliberal education policies are enacted in racialized ways, affecting many communities like Montbello. Dumas, Dixson, and Mayorga (2016) argue that, “educational policy serves as the site of political contestation over what race means, and provide rich theoretically grounded empirical examinations of just how racial representations inform and are informed by educational policy” (p. 5). Following in the vein of critical race scholarship (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), critical policy scholars stress that laws are not neutral; instead in the attempt to address societal inequalities, educational policy has propagated reforms that negatively affect racial inequality. Dumas, Dixson, and Mayorga (2016) detail how this is the case in testing policy and discourse as they “become sites of a rightist ideological form of multiculturalism that proffers market-based reforms as the solution to structural racial inequality” (p. 8). Additionally, Gillborn (2005) explains how racial inequity is a fundamental characteristic of the educational system and positions education policy as “an act of

white supremacy because it supports and affirms the very structure of racist domination and oppression” (p. 498).

A powerful example of how neoliberal education policies like school choice can play out in racialized ways is provided by Noguera’s (2015) study of New York schools, where he demonstrated how school choice reforms disproportionately affect low-income communities of color. Often accompanied by school closures, these policies allow for further disinvestment in already impoverished communities, often pushing students to choose schools outside their neighborhoods. Similarly, Dixson et al. (2015) describe how school closures maintained racial segregation and white supremacy in New Orleans; often renaming important community institutions and forcing existing students to attend other schools. The neoliberal tactic of closing “failing” schools and forcing students to find opportunities for quality education in other neighborhoods allowed for the appropriation of a school for white interests. Interest convergence (Bell, 1980), where the interest of Blacks in achieving racial equity will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites, is at play when white interests are prioritized in neoliberal tactics purporting to establish a quality education. Interest convergence can be seen in cases where white interests are aligned with narratives of school closures, or when school choice policies are positioned to “empower” communities, bringing many African American and other non-white actors to support these practices. In the end, efforts in New York and Louisiana showed how neoliberal reforms—while aiming to improve educational quality—did not improve neighborhoods for Black residents or provide access to better education for racially minoritized students (Noguera, 2015; Dixson et al., 2015). Instead, school choice policies led to disinvestment and fragmentation in these communities.

This marketized context explicitly shapes the ways that parents can participate in their child's education. For example, these policies position parents as consumers with the power to choose quality schools and are encouraged to view school as a private good. Moreover, Krings et al. (2018) explains that, "within a neoliberal context, [parents'] best options were viewed to be individual-level strategies (e.g., to personally drive children to school or enroll them in another district) rather than collective strategies" (p. 306). This process of marketization—although promoted as a road to empowerment for marginalized parents—can work to constrain and limit the power of parents in educational systems (Marsh et al., 2015; Krings et al., 2018).

Since neoliberal approaches have disproportionately affected and targeted traditionally marginalized communities (Lipman, 2011), this definition of empowerment has limited the engagement of marginalized communities. Pappas (2012) explains that there is an understanding that affluent families "have a rightful place in school decision-making," but "this assumption does not hold in cities with high poverty rates or where racial minorities lack formal political power" (p. 166). She asks, in effect, which parents—and which communities—get to have "local control" and authority over their schools. Lipman (2011) describes how marginalized parents participate in choice in order to have voice in their child's education but end up contributing to the growth of neoliberal policies that restrict their power. However, Lipman does not blame parents and communities for their contributions to the expansion of the neoliberal agenda. Lipman argues that "oppressed and exploited people act in conditions not of our own making. People may choose to pragmatically engage charters in the absence of collective mobilizations and viable alternatives" (p. 229). I use this body of literature to frame the conversation around education in Montbello, as parents navigate this marketized context, in ways that shapes how they engage with their schools.

### *Engagement for Academic Achievement*

As marketized forces shape engagement practices, so do accountability goals. As schools have taken up approaches to engage parents, they have tended to focus on school-centric practices that further marginalize many parents of color and parents of low socioeconomic status (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Baird, 2015). Apart from enrollment purposes in a school choice context, the purpose of family engagement is traditionally seen as a way to improve academic achievement. Family and community engagement's goal in education policy and practice—such as in the federal Title 1 policy—is mostly geared towards improving educational equity and improving academic performance for marginalized students and for improving overall performance of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2005; Nakagawa, 2000; Sanders, 2009; Baird, 2015; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Baird (2015) explains that this emphasis on parent involvement “has resulted in an implicit definition of what constitutes involvement for all parents rather than an inductive understanding of what is occurring in families, particularly for those who are culturally and linguistically diverse,” (p. 153). These goals centered on achievement, as well as accountability pressures that force schools to prioritize achievement gains, push schools to focus on their own missions and visions when developing engagement opportunities. Baird (2015) writes that many of the “greatest hits” in practices for parent engagement are school-centered and seek to bring parents into the school's activities and support school missions. This language reflects the larger discourse surrounding parent engagement and the types of opportunities for engagement that are centered around school and around educating parents, positioning parents as lacking in knowledge (Baird, 2015). Furthermore, district and school policies continue to shape representations of parents that limit the development of authentic family relationships with schools (Nakagawa, 2000). Instead of focusing on

achievement as a benefit of successful engagement, I take up a more collaborative and holistic approach to analyzing the benefits of engagement outside of marketized and accountability goals. I describe these frameworks later in this chapter, as I detail the theoretical framework for my study.

## **Gentrification**

Since Montbello schools are largely shaped by their city and neighborhood context, I draw on literature that has explained how urban renewal policies pressure, and even threaten, neighborhoods. Montbello joins many neighborhoods in large cities experiencing gentrification, which disproportionately impacts communities of color. Gentrification is largely defined as an economic force that can change the face of a neighborhood, mostly in urban areas. Quarles and Butler (2018) define gentrification as:

a process where state-sanctioned partnerships (a) divert public resources to private interests, alter a space's built environment, cultural and economic geographies, racial composition, and class composition in ways that (b) redefine the "right to the city," for middle- and upper-class residential and commercial use, and (c) symbolically and/or physically displace the economically vulnerable and people of color (p. 453).

Researchers cite negative consequences related to gentrification such as displacement, disrupted social networks, increased economic isolation, and "diversity segregation" where people of diverse racial, ethnic, and economic classes live in the same community but do not interact with one another (Quarles & Butler, 2018). Community residents may see these changes as threats to their way of life and their survival within that neighborhood. Because of power dynamics that privilege investors, marginalized communities see their visions for their communities ignored as the investor's vision takes place. Scholars have written about how the intersection of race and

space are important to consider when examining competing visions for communities, especially as spaces for nonwhite residents are devalued and space is weaponized to benefit white interests (Harris, 1993; Mills, 1997; Lipsitz, 2007). This can be tied to the phenomenon of gentrification, where investors come in to “redeem” previously devalued spaces to turn them into valuable spaces—valuable enough for white, middle- or upper-class individuals to live in. I argue that once that space has been redeemed, the present residents are perceived to be no longer worthy enough to live there, and nonwhite, low SES individuals are pushed out without the economic means to live in this space. Lipsitz’s (2007) concept of racialization of space explicitly links space, race, and value as he argues that the national spatial imaginary is racially marked, while segregation serves as a tool of exclusion in order to raise the value of white properties. This exclusion disempowers Black communities as it creates a loss of control over space and the exchange value of their homes, leaving Black communities with limited ways to improve their conditions. This can also occur during gentrification processes, where nonwhite communities lose access to their community assets, including parks, recreation centers and schools.

Both gentrification and school choice are powerful factors that shape marginalized communities. However, these factors do not work separately or individually; they work in tandem to further shape neighborhoods. Quarles and Butler (2018) write that “gentrification is entwined with the resurgence of neoliberal governance styles that emphasize partnerships between governments and private entities (i.e., individuals and organizations) to provide public services and solve social problems” (p. 453). They explain how these factors are linked:

Neoliberal educational policies that market public schools as neighborhood or that replace neighborhood schools with expanded choice options may be especially pronounced in gentrifying contexts as government officials, private developers, and



school- and district-level education leaders seek to capitalize on the investments of newly arriving middle- and upper-class families to improve public schools (p. 453).

Lipman (2013) adds that neoliberal education policies are exacerbating gentrification effects as they are constitutive of urban restructuring processes. She explains that “education policy is both driven by, and helps shape, gentrification and the regulation and displacement of low-income communities of color. Education is integral to housing markets and cultural representations of the city, which are used to market it to mobile capital and labor” (p. 44). Additionally, Hankins (2007) claims that the “neoliberalization of social service provision has enabled private groups, such as middle-class gentrifiers, to transform critical social institutions in gentrifying neighborhoods” (p. 113). One such institution is the charter school, which, Hankins argues, enables private management of public dollars to provide public education. Hankins (2007) explains, “In particular, the role of charter schools, as highly local, quasi-public, quasi-private institutions in the gentrification equation, represent an opportunity to answer questions about new state–citizen relationships and community-building in the inner city” (p. 114). In effect, gentrifiers buy not only property, but the *idea* of an urban place-based community. If gentrifiers are also shaping the community and “buying” ideas, then schools can play a key role in structuring white spatial imaginaries.

Because of this restructuring process, gentrification and school choice work together to create negative consequences, especially for communities of color. Lipman (2008) provides evidence that “displacement, housing and school policies, and informal social and cultural mechanisms may work to exclude low-income students of color in substantial numbers from new mixed-income schools” (p. 127). Lipman questions whether these mixed-income schools and housing, the stated goals of many individuals pushing for gentrification, are benefiting low-

income families. Like in the New Orleans case (Dixson et al., 2015), investments in neighborhoods that align with white interests, or the white spatial imaginary, can further disenfranchise nonwhite residents.

These examples demonstrate that schools can be used as powerful tools in the control, displacement and racialization of space, in ways that consequently marginalize nonwhite residents. As schools are important social institutions in nonwhite communities, displacing and decentering schools can fragment those communities, break up social assets, and push residents and community members to act within neoliberal constraints.

## **Key Theoretical Resources**

### ***Trust and Distrust***

Preliminary findings from a 2018-2019 pilot study led me to deeply investigate how trust and distrust emerge in everyday interactions between Montbello schools and families. As I continued to follow this line of investigation, I began to comprehend how distrust was present between Montbello community members and the district, between community members and schools, and even among Montbello residents themselves. To study the phenomenon occurring in Montbello, I draw from Schultz's (2019) framework of distrust. In her book, *Distrust and Educational Change: Overcoming Barriers to Just and Lasting Reform*, she outlines three different types of distrust often present in educational reforms: relational, structural and contextual.

Schultz (2019) explains that *contextual distrust* “arises from local interactions that have persisted over time, often between members of various ethnic and racial groups, and is also inflected by power” (p. 4). Contextual distrust therefore is linked to the sociocultural, historical, and political contexts of schools and communities. Schultz provides a very clear example of how

contextual distrust can manifest itself within the process of a school closure in Chicago. Schultz (2019) details this process of diminishing trust as “tied to a history of political exclusion in several arenas, a diminishing of public services, and the quality of their lives” (p. 9). Contextual distrust can be shaped by broader political, economic and social contexts; factors that then shape the actions of other stakeholders, such as districts.

Schultz (2019) describes *structural distrust* as “connected to local politics and consequential decisions made by politicians and others in authority...it is embedded in hierarchies and bureaucratic structures or policies and is characterized by an imbalance of power that undermines participation by local communities” (p. 4). She explains that this type of distrust often stems from top-down decisions. For example, in the same case of school closure in Chicago, structural distrust was shaped by the decision-making processes of the mayor-appointed school board. She explains that “the board members and school district officials responsible for this school closing—along with a large number of closings in 2013—made the decisions *for* rather than *with* the community. Structural distrust reflects hierarchical decision-making in which those in power make decisions for those in less powerful positions, often ignoring their dreams or demands” (p. 7).

The last layer of distrust Schultz describes is *relational distrust*, which “is grounded in interpersonal relationships that are characterized by unpredictability and unreliability. It is the most frequently recognized form of distrust and often masks the other two forms of distrust: structural and contextual distrust” (p. 3). While structural or contextual factors often shape the backdrop of decisions, actors may tend to focus more on the more obvious relational manifestations of distrust. Schultz uses this framework to describe how many communities are quick to blame *individuals* for shifts that occur in educational reforms—in other words, to see

situations through a lens of *relational* trust. However, this move, as Schultz explains, obscures the structural and contextual factors that shape distrust. When these deeper causes remain hidden, reformers continue in practices that foment further distrust.

For Schultz, hierarchical decision-making and the failure to involve community members in change processes can contribute to such patterns. Schultz (2019) argues that educational stakeholders must first address all multi-faceted layers of distrust. Indeed, she notes that “inattention to the role of distrust in educational change has contributed to cycles of failure that are evident in the history of educational reform” (Schultz, 2019, p. 15). Furthermore, she contends that reformers must resist quick fixes and must “recognize the dignity of children, teachers, and communities in order to address distrust” (p. 16). Schultz argues that to pay attention to all levels of distrust, reformers must respect the dignity of community members they aim to collaborate with. She particularly foregrounds the importance of listening:

Listening “is much more than giving people an opportunity to talk. It involves being open to learning in each moment. Listening also involves being attentive to the local, historical, social, and political contexts and attuned to the interpersonal dynamics of the individuals involved in the process,” (Schultz, 2019, p. 92).

This type of respect and dignity can build trust and counteract some of the consequences of historical distrust present in educational contexts.

To take up this position on listening, I draw on related resources to help describe elements of dignity and worth in Montbello, and to describe the emotional magnitude and uneven consequences of school closure in this community. I particularly draw on Ewing’s (2018) approach to exploring the experiences, emotions, and even community trauma of closing schools. Ewing (2018) argues for the importance of such emotional concerns:

Using words like love in a conversation about educational policy decisions feels almost taboo, or somehow in poor taste. Perhaps it's rude to talk about love in polite company. Instead, closing schools are presented as uniformly valueless, without worth, and characterized mostly by criteria that are as far as you can get from something as base and as messy as human emotion (p. 134).

Here, Ewing contrasts these experienced realities with the seemingly more “objective” criteria used to evaluate—and often sanction—schools.

In a similar sense, Rendon (2009) critiques what she calls “dominant agreements” that pervade our approaches to education, one of them being the agreement to privilege intellectual and rational knowing. She argues instead for *sentipensante*—or a Sensing/Thinking pedagogy, one that includes, “the *sentir* of intuition, introspection, and the inner life and the *pensar* of intellectual development and the outer life of action and service” (Rendon, 2011, p. 5). By taking up these “messy” approaches that prioritize human emotion—and reject the prioritization of logic and rationality—in education, we can take on a more decolonized and humanizing approach to understanding the impact of policies on marginalized communities as well as the reactions of those most affected by those policies.

Drawing on Schultz's framework—and these other resources—allowed me to be attentive to the multiple forms and layers of distrust present in everyday interactions between the district, school leaders, parents, students, and other community members. I quickly realized that the closure of the former Montbello High School cast a long shadow over the ways that present district and school leaders attempted to build relationships with community members. This lens allowed me to carefully detail the ways that different aspects of distrust were interwoven into Montbello interactions, especially in ways that residents made sense of further efforts to

restructure and reform Montbello schools. I develop this analysis in more detail in Chapter 4.

### ***Framing Engagement***

As my fieldwork continued, I became more interested in how stakeholders were moving forward—through an environment of distrust and suspicion—to attempt to create or repair relationships between families and the neighborhoods’ schools. My fieldwork increasingly focused on the efforts of DCISM, and its outreach to different parents and community groups. My study shifts our focus to what happens *after* divisive education reforms have been implemented. In order to frame my exploration of how school leaders attempted to build relationships and reposition themselves in this context of distrust, I draw on critical frameworks of parent and community engagement.

I particularly focus on Ishimaru’s (2020) and Hong’s (2011) frameworks of engagement. Ishimaru (2020) describes how the field has shifted from *parent involvement* to *family engagement* in an effort to “expand beyond biological parents to other family members, include the cultural practices and priorities of diverse communities, and position parents and families as critical actors in student academic success” (p. 3). However, this shift is not enough, since “both involvement and engagement approaches largely enact a theory of change focused on changing—or ‘fixing’—marginalized parents and families,” which then “align with prevailing racialized narratives about low-income families and communities of color that implicitly blame them for their children’s academic struggles” (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 3). Instead, she advocates for *equitable collaborations* to “foster solidarities amid difference toward community-determined educational justice and well-being” (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 4). These perspectives position *schools* as the locus of change, instead of families or communities.

By focusing on how schools must adapt to community needs and renegotiate their and parents' roles in the educational system, I am able to take a closer look at how these communities can move past distrust to rebuild a sense of belonging in their community. Here, Hong's (2011) ecological perspective on parent engagement is valuable, which seeks to situate schools within communities. This perspective conceptualizes engagement as a "dynamic process that cuts across relationships, events, and settings," and that "evolves over the course of a parent's participation in schools" (Hong, 2011, p. 181). Hong (2011) describes a three-phase framework which starts with induction or when parents are inducted into "school culture, the expectations of teachers, the regular interactions between students and school staff, the curriculum, and the complex social world of schools" (p. 181). Integration occurs next when they become connected to "a rich network of other parents, families, teachers, and students," develop a more collective mindset for their involvement, and when "some of the misunderstanding, distrust, and other barriers that plague school environments begin to erode" (p. 184). The last phase is one of investment, where schools change their perspective to view engagement as an investment in the "continuous and evolving journey that parents take as their children move across classrooms, schools, and educational experiences" (p. 186). This investment phase may look like what Ishimaru (2020) describes as an emergent model of collaboration in her research with a parent organizing group and district leadership. She found that this model engages parents as educational leaders, focuses on shared systemic goals, strategically builds capacity and relationships, and addresses educational change as political process, which can change the traditional structures of parent engagement and reject deficit conceptions of marginalized parents and families.

Although these phases can describe the ways that parents become engaged in schools, I focus more on what Hong calls the induction and integration phase; however, instead of studying

how parents are inducted and integrated into an existing school framework, I focus on how school leaders subvert and transform school spaces to guide families, build relationships and forge community, all within a marginalizing educational system. To do so, I focus on how leaders' identities and experiences influence how they build these spaces and relationships. In Montbello's case, the migration and border crossing experiences of its many families and of DCISM's principal emerged as central in these efforts. Additionally, I focus on our PAR group, Madres de DCIS, to demonstrate how goals of engagement can prioritize collective spaces of learning for community transformation, which as I will suggest, are possibly more meaningful goals for parents than policy and structural reforms.

### ***Borderlands***

To better conceptualize the school's efforts to create a collective sense of belonging, community and care in the school, I turn to borderlands epistemologies. Here, I take up a key concept from Borderlands and Chicana theory: *acompañamiento*. I draw on Sepúlveda's (2018) conceptualization of this term, in order to theorize some of the practices that educators employ to forge relationships with families, and create humanizing spaces, even amid structural constraints. In the case of DCISM, I found that efforts to build trust and community often incorporated cultural identities and acts, which can operate as forms of "resistance against oppression and hegemonic thinking in the form of music, stories, art, and dialogues" (Sepúlveda, 2018, p. 57). In his analysis of *pedagogies of acompañamiento* in 'Bosque High,' a California high school, Sepúlveda (2018) describes this concept as the "organic emergence of a communal, dialogical, pedagogical, and cultural practice of making space at Bosque High to engage migrant youth in a different manner and address their most pressing existential concerns related to belonging,



identity, community, and learning” (p. 57). I draw on *acompañamiento* to describe and theorize how Latino/a faculty in DCIS Montbello rebuild trust with parents in a fragmented community.

According to Sepúlveda, through *acompañamiento*, a teacher or mentor is encouraged to *acompañar*, engage in dialogue, and share their experiences. Similarly, from a Chicana feminist epistemological perspective, Ventura (2020) calls for nourishment work—or critical care that includes creating borderlands spaces, or sites of belonging—for first and second-generation immigrant students. She describes how these spaces can be created through individuals working from the margins such as bilingual paraprofessionals and counselors. Through this lens, Ventura (2020) found that these educators embodied Latinx cultural values of caring relationships; these relationships were “more than a reciprocal relationship of trust; it is a collective endeavor that acknowledges the lived experiences outside of schools of both the educators and the students,” (p. 650). Therefore, individuals learn from and engage with each other, not only to build trust, but to build collective spaces where they can make sense of their experiences in humanizing ways. I use borderlands theories and pedagogies of *acompañamiento* as a lens to study the ways that educational stakeholders in Montbello attempt to rebuild trust in an environment of historical distrust *and* build transformational spaces of belonging. These concepts also allow me to deeply analyze and theorize around aspects of parents’ experiences, particularly transnational experiences which often include dehumanizing and violent experiences stemming from policies and narratives endorsed within the nation-state.

Equally important is being able to theorize how these spaces for building relationships become possibilities for social transformation. According to Dyrness (2011), *convivencia*, or living together, is central to the process of healing from wounds of past experiences and to reimagine identities as the individuals participating in this community collectively develop a

social critique and tools for resistance. This lens, drawn from a *mujerista* concept—or a Latina womanist vision—highlights the diverse knowledge and experiences of Latinas and prioritizes the “spirit and emotion” in struggles and efforts to redirect their aims and reaffirm their agency (Trinidad Galván, 2006). According to Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020), spaces of *convivencia* build on the “everyday cultural practices of the participants” in these collective spaces, which then “become a means of affirming individual experiences, developing a critical analysis, and strengthening group identity” (p. 222). As this sharing occurs, *autoformación* can occur. This concept from third world feminism, centers the “process of healing from the wounds of racism and reclaiming wholeness” (Dyrness, 2016, p. 2). As individuals participate in sharing and reflection through dialogue, they collectively create a space where they learn how their experiences are shaped by structures of domination, creating the potential for the development of critical awareness and cultural critique. Therefore, the process of *autoformación* includes both individual self-actualization and collective struggle (Dyrness, 2016, p. 2). Because of these possibilities, spaces where *convivencia* can occur are “spaces of solidarity and *acompañamiento* and of critical citizenship formation,” (Dyrness and Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 222). I use these lenses to theorize how informal conversations and relationship-building during the Madres de DCIS research meetings encouraged the reflection and renegotiation of identities and roles within Montbello schools, and how this space of dialogue has the potential for transformation and for creating spaces of belonging within schooling and other educational experiences.

### ***Belonging***

Because of the context of distrust and fragmentation in this study and the large number of immigrant families in Montbello and at DCISM, I foreground the creation of spaces of belonging, particularly for immigrant families. Although many of the studies I reviewed focused

on creating belonging for *students*, my study contributes to the conversation on how *parents* also perceive and experience belonging in schools and communities. Several studies have described how schools have strived to create inclusive spaces for students through wrap-around services, an eye to addressing larger community needs, and creating inclusive parent engagement practices (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Georgis et al., 2014; Chavez-Reyes, 2010). Others have pointed to how parent engagement can be operationalized to “apply the hopeful vision of what authentic and democratic parent engagement can become,” through a model that operationalizes successful methods of inclusive engagement practices (Jiménez-Castellanos et al., 2016, p. 93). However, creating a sense of belonging in schools can be a complex task, especially for immigrant families. Or in the case when schools attempt to create belonging through *integration* into an existing school and community, these efforts “often mirror nationalist discourses of belonging that pose their transnational connections as a threat” (Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2019). For example, studies have suggested that integrating immigrant parents benefits their children’s academics since, “broadly put, immigrant parents lack the cultural and social capital in the mainstream that would enable them to strategize and assist their children’s school careers,” (Alba, 2011, p. 401). However, this view, although perhaps well-intentioned, positions parents and immigrant families as in need of intervention, in order to “properly” belong.

Furthermore, other scholars have revealed how strategies for creating belonging for immigrant children in schools can sometimes silence young people’s transnational experiences and identities. For example, Jaffe-Walter (2016) documents how Muslim youth in Danish schools experience what she terms benevolent narratives of care and concern. These schools, led by political leaders and policies, engage in “coercive assimilation,” which seeks to integrate students into Western ways of being, all while seeking to benefit the Muslim youth; however,

this approach to belonging in schools and in the nation-state strips youth of their citizenship potential (Jaffe-Walter, 2016). Scholars have demonstrated that immigrant youth have untapped strengths obtained through their border-crossing experiences that allow them to hold critical understandings of society around them (Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2019; Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020; Ríos-Rojas, 2011). These policies and practices meant to create a sense of belonging for transnational youth also serve to integrate and assimilate them through silencing their transnational experiences and identities. This policy context complicates belonging for many youth and their families. In a study with immigrant youth, Ríos-Rojas (2011) pays attention to the “multiple and at times contradictory ways in which youth maneuver within a social landscape that is flooded with confusing messages about what it means to belong (or not) in a new society,” (p. 64). Therefore, as immigrant families navigate how to belong, educators must question and reformulate what it means to belong in schools and school communities.

Dyrness and Abu El-Haj (2019) argue that schools and educators must move away from nationalist notions of belonging. They explain that “shifting our lens away from the needs and expectations of schools as institutions of the nation-state and toward the needs of democratic social change across borders, allows us to recognize and capitalize on the citizenship potential of young people’s transnational practices of belonging.” (p. 2). As educators capitalize on transnational practices, they encourage collective spaces where transnational actors can share in identities and experiences, potentially moving towards a sense of belonging. For example, Dyrness (2016) demonstrates how in activist associations in Madrid, migrant women created new communities of belonging that nurtured and sustained their public activism. As she establishes, these spaces of belonging can become places where individuals question and learn together for their own *and* collective transformation (Dyrness, 2016). In addition, Abu El-Haj’s

research reveals how a “sense of collectivism translated into ways of being and acting in their new countries,” when she documented how “young people growing up with a sense of belonging to Palestinian communities living under conditions of military occupation or statelessness were educated into a commitment to collective support for the economic well-being of people near and far,” (Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2019, p. 7).

In conclusion, developing a space of belonging for those that have experienced border-crossing includes what Dyrness and Abu El-Haj (2019) describe as embracing “the ambiguity of transnational belonging as a site for new democratic citizen formations” (p. 10). These scholars argue that as transnational youth participated in a space of collective belonging, they developed a “critical awareness of inequality across borders and their intimate connections to multiple places” which “deepened their perspectives on and their yearning for democratic citizenship” (p. 10). They end with a call for scholars to question the school practices that “mirror nationalist discourses of belonging” (p. 11). This requires a commitment to engaging in research that resists “imperatives of school achievement” and instead, “look for spaces within and outside of schools where education can be redefined to fulfill the democratic yearnings of transnational youth and advance the goals of democratic social change” (p. 11). I seek to fulfill this goal as I document and analyze how spaces of belonging in schools can be developed for marginalized and immigrant families. By focusing on how *acompañamiento* for families can be achieved through humanizing practices in schools, I also investigate how transnational forms of being can exist in learning spaces. Furthermore, our PAR group, *Madres de DCIS*, also became a lens through which a sense of belonging—where mothers could be their full selves as well as transform themselves and their communities—might also hold the potential for democratic social change.

The frameworks described above shape my methodological approach, especially as I strive to engage in pedagogies of acompañamiento in my approach to research with marginalized and immigrant families struggling to belong. In the next chapter, I begin describing my commitment to this methodological stance in my ethnographic work.

## **Chapter II: Methodological Approach**

In addition to the areas of literature and conceptual frameworks I described in the previous chapter, my approach to this study has been shaped by a tradition of participatory research and participatory models of ethnography. In this chapter, I describe some of the epistemological foundations of these traditions, as well as how these approaches have shaped this study and my methodological choices. My research questions also guided my design of methodology. Because of the nature of the questions that sought to answer the “why” and “how” in the interactions between schools and community in Montbello, I relied on qualitative methods that allowed me to capture these dynamics. As outlined in the introduction, my research questions are:

1. In the wake of unpopular reforms and gentrification pressures, how do community fragmentation and distrust impact school-community relationships?
2. In the face of distrust in the community and schools, how do parents, school leaders, and community members rebuild trust and relationships? What strategies do school and parent leaders use to negotiate those relationships?
3. How do school leaders, and other key members of school staff, try to build common aims for parent engagement in a context of accountability era reforms?
4. How do school leaders and faculty navigate building a sense of community in a fragmented and divided Latino and Black neighborhood?

I then turn to the design of my study, detailing the different methods and data sources I employed to study the interactions of education stakeholders in Montbello. I also describe my approach to the analysis of ethnographic data. In the final section, I turn to my own positionality; I describe my identity as a researcher, my relationships with participants in the focal school, as well as the broader community, and how I was positioned in fieldwork.

### **Methods**

As I outlined in the previous chapter, trust is not just an object of study; it is central to the design of my study. To frame my approach to this study, I draw on Vakil et al.'s (2016) concept of *politicized trust*. They describe politicized trust as a process of “establishing trust with community partners, especially in communities that serve students from nondominant groups,” which “requires not only a personal working relationship, but also a political or racial solidarity” (Vakil et al., 2016, p. 12). Politicized trust underscores the necessity of paying attention to how political forces—such as race, power and privilege—operate in research contexts. Guided by this concept and traditions in critical ethnography and participatory modes of research, I sought to conduct research *with* community members, to attempt to unmask systems of power, and provide spaces for change and transformation.

My dissertation is a critical ethnography that explores the contested relationships between DCISM, one of the schools co-located on the former Montbello High campus, and its parent and community stakeholders. I explore how these relationships intersect with broader forces—including gentrification and market-oriented reforms—which complicate the efforts of school leaders and community members to forge common goals and rebuild trust. In this section, I describe how concepts of trust—and politicized trust—shaped the critical and participatory aspects of my study. I describe how I locate my study in a broad tradition on critical ethnography, as well as specific traditions of critical, participatory research. I discuss the nature of my multi-layered case, and then turn to the qualitative methods and data sources I used to explore my case. I then describe the participatory action dimension of my study. I conclude by reflecting on my own positionality as a researcher, and my evolving relationships with school and community stakeholders in my study.

### **Critical Ethnographic Methods**



Guided by similar ethnographic approaches (i.e., Dyrness, 2011), my study draws on a variety of qualitative data sources, including participant observation, interviews, document and artifact analysis, and participatory methods. Qualitative methods are appropriate for my study since I aim to analyze the interactions, identities and roles of parents, community members, and school staff members. Ethnography, a type of qualitative research method, offers strategies for understanding complex features of human life, as it seeks to “show the range of cultural differences and how people with diverse perspectives interact” (Spradley, 1980, 16). Specifically, critical ethnography can more adeptly provide an anthropological focus on social inequities where researchers, “apply a sociopolitical framework in order to interrogate these relations of power with hopes of transforming them through the research process itself” (Lopez et al., 2011, 547). By engaging in this work, I question the centrality of school and district actors as decision-makers as well as the devaluing of parents in education. I seek to explore transformative ways to challenge these systems of power.

I follow the tradition of anthropologists of education and critical ethnographers who have responded to deficit constructions of parents with “critical, nuanced ethnographic portraits illuminating the educative and culturally transformative roles of these parents in and outside of schools” (Hurtig & Dyrness, 2011, p. 534). By engaging in this work, these ethnographers question the construction and essentialization of marginalized parents, problematize systems and tools that have created this construction, and create transformative ways to challenge these systems of power. For example, Villenas (2012) calls for an examination of deficit-framed discourses *and* educational policies that shape parents through *ethnographies de lucha*. According to Villenas (2012), deficit discourse is engrained in educational policies as they continue “to assume that the cultural and language practices of families and youths from

nondominant communities are deficient and need to be remediated and changed” (p. 13). Consequently, researchers of these policies must challenge mainstream perceptions and the structures that hold these perceptions as “natural” ways of thinking, creating hegemonic constructions of marginalized families. With policies, discourses, practices and current reforms all reinforcing these perceptions of marginalized parents, Hurtig (2008b) argues that we cannot escape “engagement with systemic school reform’s hegemonic construction of parent involvement” (p. 20).

In particular, Chicana/o and Latina/o scholars have created alternate routes that challenge these deficit-oriented and essentialized portraits, arguing, for instance, that “any discussion of school achievement requires attention to the intersecting experiences of race, class, gender, and sexuality and the emerging modes of consciousness” (Villenas & Foley, 2011, p. 184). Through borderlands and feminist counternarratives that explain the role of these intersecting factors in shaping the lives of marginalized families, ethnographers can document and theorize “cultural, language, and literacy practices across home school, and community” (Villenas, 2012, p. 14) and allow for more ambiguity and nuance in the construction of these portraits (Torre & Ayala, 2009). Therefore, in all of my data collection methods, I targeted *discourses about parents* to analyze how policies, districts, schools, and even other parents construct parents and parent engagement in particular ways.

While my study is broadly located within the tradition of critical ethnography, I also draw on Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology to frame my study. Describing work with youth participatory action research (YPAR), Cammarota and Fine (2008) define YPAR as providing “young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems” (p. 2). Such research models show how power

dynamics can be challenged and questioned through the research process itself. These dynamics are challenged by putting “research in the service of community struggles and the development of critical local knowledge,” instead of producing knowledge for academia and academic circles (Hurtig, 2008a, p. 103). Additionally, PAR can provide space for the prioritization of community members’ learning and their growth of critical consciousness. Hurtig (2008b) explains that applying one’s own experiences to research and engaging in collective reflection can lead parents to “consider and often challenge facts of systemic school reform” (p. 21).

PAR and critical ethnography together have the potential to critically examine and challenge power relations through the research produced and through the *process* of research itself. Dyrness (2011) used PAR with a group of Latina mothers, “Madres Unidas,” to collectively engage in critical ethnographic work as they reflected upon and analyzed the structures and practices that limited or fomented their advocacy in their children’s education. Dyrness (2011) writes that critical ethnography enhanced their research and created space for transformational change since, “Madres Unidas made use of cultural critique as a key element of their transformation and intervention at their children’s school” (p. 207). Dyrness also acknowledges PAR was essential since collaboration “provided the opportunity to deepen and extend this critique by providing a venue for being together, a counterspace, in which they could collectively explore their experiences, inquire into the experiences of other parents, and analyze these experiences together in light of broader patterns at the school” (2011, p. 207). Through a combination of these methods, research can provide an avenue for challenging power structures and creating potentially transformational practices. In the case of my research in DCIS Montbello, I collaborated with a parent research group to work to develop and advocate for *their* vision for Montbello schools, a perspective that remained marginalized in reform discussions.

## **Montbello as a Case**

As outlined in the introduction, this study provides an interpretation of a broad and complex case, not easily described linearly or in well-defined themes. The factors that shape the neighborhood are intricately intertwined, making it difficult to evaluate factors that impact Montbello in isolation. Instead, my methods allow me to take a holistic, historical, and deep approach to studying the interactions that impact education in this neighborhood. I treat my study as what White (2014) describes as an embedded case, where “the main purpose” of a school case was to “lend insight to broader interpretations” about larger trends in education reform (p. 77). For example, as I seek to highlight engagement practices and participation of Latino parents in various school and parent activities, I situate these practices within broader DCISM dynamics. Likewise, a deep analysis of neighborhood dynamics is essential to inform our understanding of the school and of individual interactions within engagement efforts. As I detail the interactions between DCISM and Montbello families—as well as the larger Montbello context that molds these interactions—I gain insight into the effects of education reforms that have swept the nation, particularly in displaced and divided “Black and Brown” communities where stakeholders reconstruct their visions for education. As McDermott and Raley (2011) describe, I delved into local politics in an attempt to reveal the “writ large in which daily struggles of school are embedded,” as I engaged in methodic and self-conscious analysis to reveal the hidden systematics of a wider social order, (p. 35).

Although some may argue that case studies are difficult narratives to summarize into generalizable findings, Flyjberg (2006) argues that “to the case-study researcher, however, a particularly ‘thick’ and hard-to-summarize narrative is not a problem. Rather, it is often a sign that the study has uncovered a particularly rich problematic” (p. 21). In the following chapter, I

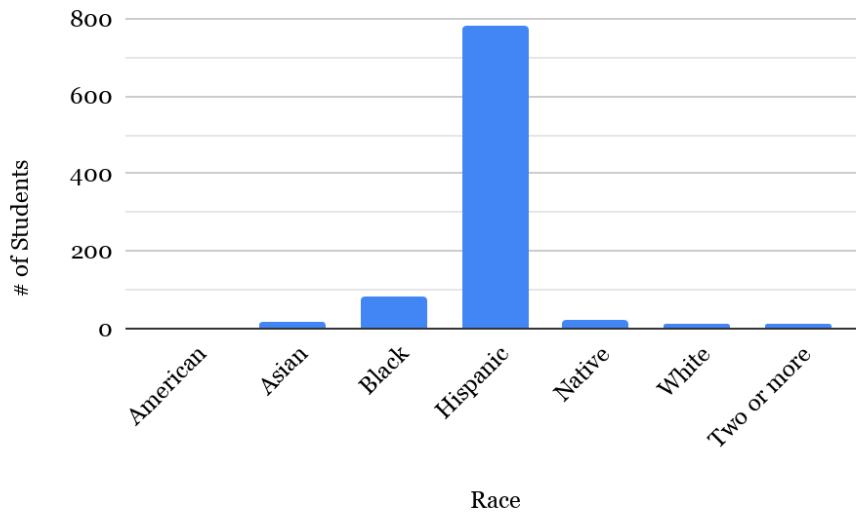
describe the case in detail, particularly the centrality of schools to the Montbello identity, as well as the history and policies that have contributed to the fragmentation of the neighborhood and the racialized divisions that color school dynamics. This case, although complex, provides a lens to understand the impact of sweeping education reforms in local contexts.

### **Denver Center for International Studies at Montbello (DCISM)**

This study, although contextualized within the larger Montbello neighborhood, was largely conducted at the Denver Center for International Studies at Montbello (DCISM). This school is a combined middle and high school of about 900 students and, similar to the neighborhood it is situated in, is a largely Black and Brown school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). In 2019, the school enrolled 80 Black students (around 8% of total students) and 784 Hispanic students (around 84% of total students).

**Figure 1**

*DCISM Racial Demographics of Enrolled Students in 2019-2020*



The school serves many immigrant families, including families from Latin America, from French-speaking African countries, and a growing number of families from the Marshall Islands.

About 88% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). DCISM has innovation status, which signifies that the school has autonomy to make decisions surrounding “personnel, calendar, and budget decisions,” (Marsh et al., 2021, p. 127). The school is regarded “low performing” (at level orange, the second to last ranking) according to the district’s School Performance Framework, an “accountability system holding all schools to the same performance criteria (test scores, academic growth, engagement, enrollment, and parent satisfaction)” (Marsh et al., 2021, p. 136; Denver Public Schools, 2021). Despite the low academic achievement, the school is still popular and is one of the largest schools in Montbello. In comparison, another combined middle and high school on the same campus as DCIS had only 476 students enrolled in the 2018-2019 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b).

One possible contributing factor to the popularity of the school, especially with immigrant students in Montbello, is that the school is designated as a Transitional Native Language Instruction (TNLI) school. This designation allows the school to offer a variety of services to English Language Learners, including providing Spanish supports in core content classrooms (Denver Center for International Studies, 2021). Additionally, the school has a Newcomer Center for both the middle and high school, which is designed for students who are new to Denver Public Schools *and* new to the United States. The Newcomer Centers also serve English language learners identified as SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) who may have minimal literacy skills in both their native language and English (Denver Center for International Studies, 2021). The goal of this program is to integrate newcomer students into grade level content instruction and core content classrooms in one or two semesters. DCISM is one of only three high schools in Denver with a Newcomer Center and is the only school with a

Newcomer Center in the Far Northeast, making this school a sought-after choice for immigrant families residing in Montbello (Denver Center for International Studies, 2021).

DCISM also has a focus on international studies, as stated in its name. It is a part of a larger network of schools that focuses on offering world languages, global studies, and international travel for students. DCISM is one of four Denver Center for International Studies school sites, the first of them founded in 2006 (DCIS Foundation, 2021). These four schools are supported by the Asia Society's International Studies Schools Network, whose mission is to “close the achievement gap for low-income and historically underserved secondary students, and address the growing opportunity gap between what American schools typically teach and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for full participation in a global economy” (Center for Global Education, 2021). At DCISM, the international program consists of offering French, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, and Italian languages, as well as a Global Arts curriculum (Denver Center for International Studies, 2021). Several students have also participated in international trips to China and a group of about 15 students were preparing to travel to Europe before the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted those plans.

DCISM opened its doors in 2011 when Montbello High School was undergoing its phasing out process<sup>2</sup>. This context largely shaped the way that the community interacts with DCISM faculty, especially since the school is located on the campus where Montbello High formerly stood. DCISM is, thus, a “co-located” campus, meaning that the school shares a building and resources with other schools. This study began during the 2018-2019 school year, which was the principal’s (Mr. Silva’s) second year at this school and concluded in what is likely the second to last year of the school’s existence, as it is slated to be absorbed into a new

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<sup>2</sup> I describe Montbello High School’s phasing out process in more detail in Chapter 3.

comprehensive Montbello high school. I situate my analysis of DCISM and its engagement efforts within this context and the larger neighborhood dynamics that ultimately shape school-community relationships.

### **Methods and Data Collection**

As the context in Montbello is complex and “hard-to-summarize,” I rely on critical ethnographic methods to collect data on interactions between stakeholders, with an eye to the political intentions or motives of these actors. I also use participatory methods to challenge power dynamics and to develop political trust both within the research process and within the relationships we seek to build in the Montbello community. In the following sections, I describe my methods of data collection, and data sources, in more detail.

#### ***Pilot Study***

In designing this ethnography, I was informed by findings from a pilot study I conducted at DCIS Montbello during the 2018-2019 school year, where I explored the school’s efforts to build parent and community engagement. Through volunteering at the school and observing school events, I also noted how the identity of the principal, a Salvadoran immigrant in his second year as administrator of the school, and the school population (more than 80% Latino students), affected the dynamics of building trust in a community that is widely seen as an African American neighborhood.

Because of my relationship with the principal (which I detail more below, as well as in Chapter 7), I was provided access to the school’s public events (e.g., open houses, parent meetings, and award ceremonies) as well as more private events (e.g., professional development sessions and planning meetings). I was able to conduct at least weekly observations (on average, for about 1-2 hours a week) throughout the school year as I attended a variety of events/meetings



(for a total of 40 hours of observations in my pilot study year). I also interviewed the principal about his understanding of parent and community engagement and conducted a preliminary social media analysis of narratives about Montbello and its residents. In this preliminary study, I documented deep patterns of distrust and tensions experienced by school leaders who were asked to simultaneously balance fidelity to district reforms against fragile and fractured relationships with parents and community leaders, many of whom were deeply distrustful of district initiatives and reform efforts.

This pilot study became the foundation for my dissertation study and my subsequent data collection: a process that included close observations, interviews and collaborative investigation over the course of the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school year. My study thus includes three years of immersion in a particular school and neighborhood. It is important to note that even before this pilot study, I served as a soccer coach for an elementary school in Montbello during the 2017-2018 school year, which added another year to my presence in Montbello and to my visibility in the community that helped me to build relationships and trust with Montbello residents.

Table 1: Data collection by year

Year	Data collection activities & data sources
2018-2019	40 hours of volunteer work and observation time (with around 20 hours of fieldnotes), 1 interview with the principal, document collection
2019-2020	60 hours of observation, 11 interviews with school faculty and parents, document collection
2020-2021	20 hours of observation, 12 interviews with parents and community members, 1 interview with the principal, bi-weekly PAR group meetings, 1 plática with Madres de DCIS, document collection

With the unforeseen pandemic beginning in early 2020, my original plans for interviews and observations had to be adjusted. I detail these methodological strategies pre- and post-pandemic in more detail in the following sections.

### ***Participant Observation***

As a participant observer, I aimed to become explicitly aware of complex social interactions. Specifically, I was guided by Spradley's (1980) approach to participant observation, where the researcher strives to have "a wide-angle lens" to take in a "broader spectrum of information", experience being an "insider and outsider simultaneously", and increase "introspectiveness," (Spradley, 1980, p. 56-57). In the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, I continued to attend school events and public meetings at the high school in Montbello, attend parent advisory committee meetings and school advisory committee meetings, participate in planning meetings for parent engagement events, volunteer in everyday activities in the school, and attend professional development sessions for teachers. I also continued to attend community events in Montbello, such as festivals, community events, town halls, and district meetings. I documented these activities and nature of the stakeholder's interactions in these spaces through writing extensive field notes on a notepad, phone, or laptop, which I later transcribed and categorized by date. Because of the frequency of these events, my attendance at these events and the collection of fieldnotes in the school and community were—on average—around 1-2 times a week. While the length of events varied, I spent at least 5 hours a week observing school and community activities. I observed how people interacted with each other with a focus on the impact of the understanding of parent and community engagement and relationship-building on these interactions. I aimed to understand the different underlying narratives in Montbello and how people act upon these narratives. For instance, in my fieldnotes for the February 2020

Reimagining Montbello meeting, I recorded the interactions and conversations among district leaders, administrators, parents, and community members as they deliberated on how to engage more Latino voices in the district decision-making, as well as how parents and community members received and reacted to the information the district provided about the development of a new Montbello campus. In addition to fieldnotes of observations, I also wrote memos after informal ethnographic interviews, or when I asked questions and had conversations with individuals and interviews during participant observation, particularly with the principal, Mr. Silva (Spradley, 1980, p. 123).

During Covid-19, many of these events were canceled. However, some events such as parent forums, district meetings, and research meetings started to be held online through mediums like Zoom or Google Meet. For example, in October of 2020, a Reimagining Montbello meeting was held through Zoom. This medium allowed for an easier documentation of conversations and the participation of individuals attending the meeting, especially when the session was recorded and posted online, and when I could copy and paste dialogue that occurred in the Zoom chat feature. However, this medium impeded the collection of more subtle observations, such as the behavior of those that did not feel comfortable speaking up in the meetings, as well as one-on-one interactions or side talk. I documented field notes on my computer and in some cases, I was able to refer to recorded sessions provided publicly by the district. Overall, my field notes include entries from over 70 separate meetings, events and observations: totaling 294 pages of written notes.

### ***Interviews***

In my study, I found it necessary to document the different perspectives that contributed to perceived divisions in the community. To do so, I took up a concept of listening similar to one

described by Kinloch and San Pedro (2014). They explain that their idea of listening “takes shape from our recognition that there are multiple worldviews that often get negatively positioned in conflict with one another instead of being constructed as different and diverse” (p. 27). As I took up this concept in my interviews, I strived to find the nuances in the ways that Montbello residents and school staff perceived their experiences and described the dynamics in the neighborhood schools.

My decisions on who to interview and what questions to ask emerged from my participant observations. As I observed and built relationships with Montbello community members, DCISM staff, and parents, I became more attuned to how their perspectives on community dynamics and their experiences engaging in schools were multi-faceted and highlighted their underlying outlook on Montbello schools. Many of the participants I interviewed were people that I built relationships with as I attended school and community events. Therefore, most of these interviews I conducted were with parents, community members, and staff who were already very involved in parent and community engagement efforts.

I conducted and audio-recorded a total of 24 semi-structured interviews with school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. Four of these interviews were administrators, 6 were teachers or staff, 8 were parents, and 3 were Montbello community members. I chose the administrators because of their involvement in designing engagement approaches and because of their participation in engagement events. I selected these 6 teachers because of their participation in engagement events at the school and others because, through my observations, I understood their closeness and dedication to families. I decided not to interview other teachers who were not as engaged with families as I wanted to have a deeper understanding of the efforts that were already taking place, and to focus on beliefs about why engagement was

important. Similarly, I did not interview parents who were not as engaged in school activities; I wanted to explore parents’ understandings of existing engagement efforts and how they negotiated their roles within these efforts. However, Covid-19 also became a barrier to finding other parents who were trusting enough to speak with me; I focused on speaking with those parents who I had interacted with—and forged relationships with—during previous in-person events in Montbello. For example, I selected these 8 parents because of their participation in parent advisory meetings or other engagement activities. These parents included those that I have been able to build relationships with through my participation in school activities and through the activities through the research group (four of the interviews were with mothers in the research group). I also conducted a focus group or *plática* with the research group, Madres de DCIS where 6 of the 7 members attended. The mother who could not attend the *plática* was interviewed at a later date. Each of these participants is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Interview participants

Group	Pseudonym	Positionalities & perspectives	Date	Length
Administrators	Mr. Silva	DCISM principal, Central American immigrant	1/27/2019 12/30/2020	30 minutes, 1 hr
Administrator	Ms. Danvers	White woman, DCIS assistant principal	4/16/2020	55 minutes
Administrator	Mr. Denis	Black man, immigrant, DCIS assistant principal	9/2/2020	1 hr 7 min
Administrator	Ms. Gray	Black woman, former DCIS assistant principal	3/31/2020	47 minutes
Faculty	Ms. Melendez	DCIS Social worker, daughter of Latino immigrants	4/3/2020	23 minutes
Faculty	Ms. Lopez	DCIS Leadership faculty, daughter of Latino immigrants	4/2/2020	42 minutes

Faculty	Ms. Davis	DCIS White teacher	4/2/2020	1 hr
Faculty	Mr. Martinez	DCIS Latino Newcomer teacher, South American immigrant	9/5/2020	53 minutes
Faculty	Ms. Mejia	DCIS Latino Newcomer teacher, South American immigrant	9/4/2020	1 hr 3 min
Staff	Ms. Perez	DCIS Family Liaison, South American immigrant	4/7/2020	27 minutes
Staff	Ms. Marta	DCIS Secretary, Family Engagement team, member of Madres de DCIS	2/19/2021	50 minute plática
Parent/Staff	Ms. Thompson	Black resident of Montbello for 10+ years, DCISM Paraprofessional, Family Engagement team, parent	4/3/2020	40 minutes
Parent	Lorena	Central American immigrant, lived in U.S for 20+ years, Montbello resident for 10 years, Montbello conectora and organizer, member of Madres de DCIS, parent	4/14/2020 2/19/2021	35 minutes, 50 minute plática
Parent	Juana	Central American immigrant, lived in U.S. and Montbello resident for 20 years, member of Madres de DCIS, parent	4/23/2020 2/19/2021	50 minutes, and 50 minute plática
Parent	Jaqui	Mexican immigrant, lived in U.S. for 15+ years, Montbello resident for 5 years, Montbello organizer for 10+ years, parent	4/14/2020, 2/23/2020	1 hr 3 min, and
Parent	Teresa	Mexican immigrant, lived in U.S. and Montbello resident for 11 years, Montbello conectora and organizer, parent	8/20/2020 2/19/2021	50 minutes, and 50 minute plática
Parent	Sra. Gutierrez	Mexican immigrant, lived in U.S. and Montbello resident for 5 years, parent	9/8/2020	33 minutes
Parent	Sra. Aguilar	Mexican immigrant, lived in U.S. and Montbello resident for 3 years, parent	9/10/2020	45 minutes

Parent	Mme. Bonnet	African immigrant, lived in U.S. and Montbello resident for 4 years, parent	9/16/2020	41 minutes
Parent	Denise	Central American immigrant, Montbello resident for 3 years, member of Madres de DCIS, parent	2/19/2021	50 minute plática
Parent	Isabel	Mexican immigrant, Montbello resident for 3 years, member of Madres de DCIS, parent	2/19/2021	50 minute plática
Community member	Brandon Pryor	Black leader, organizer, parent of child in Montbello schools, grew up in Montbello	8/28/2020	1 hr 14 min
Community member	Donna Garnett	White leader, organizer, grandmother of child in Montbello, resident of Montbello for 20+ years	9/4/2020	47 min
Community member	Marjorie Ledell	White resident of Montbello in the 70s	2/5/2021	1 hr
Media	Melanie Asmar	White reporter for Chalkbeat, writes education stories on Montbello	8/10/2020	36 minutes

All of the above names—except for the community leaders and the journalist—are pseudonyms.

Following the school’s convention, I refer to most participants by their last name (and Ms./Mr.).

Because of the close relationships I developed with the parents in the research group, I refer to their first names (also pseudonyms). In the few cases I use both first and last names, these are individuals’ real names used with their permission or because they are public figures.

Additionally, since the majority of Latino parents—especially those that are engaged in DCISM—are Mexican, I chose to identify some mothers as Central American instead of specifying their nationality to protect their identities. Among the interviews above, I conducted and audio recorded two semi-structured interviews with the principal at DCISM in the 2019-2020 school year. In the first 30-minute interview (January of 2019) I focused on asking questions about his understanding and beliefs about situations occurring during school events

and activities and his plans for future engagement opportunities. In the second hour-long interview (December of 2020), I asked about his experiences as an immigrant and school leader—and the intersection of these identities—as well as his experiences in building trust and relationships at DCISM. Because of the key role of the principal—and his centrality in my findings—I also often wrote up memos after other informal conversations with Mr. Silva (which are included in the field notes noted above).

Many of the participants in this study were Spanish-speakers and some were only comfortable speaking in Spanish. Since I am a native Spanish-speaker, I conducted interviews with these individuals in Spanish. However, I conducted interviews in Spanish for several bilingual speakers as well, as I followed their lead in determining which language they were more comfortable communicating in with me. Those interviews conducted in Spanish were transcribed in Spanish and only the quotes included in this written product were translated to English. I personally translated the quotes originally in Spanish. My brother, a fluent French-speaker, translated the quotes originally in French.

Because of Covid-19, all interviews, apart from the interviews with Mr. Silva, were conducted through Zoom or Google Meet. The interviews generally lasted from 30 minutes to an hour, and I focused on asking questions about the role of parents in education, relationships between schools and community in Montbello, and their sense of belonging in the community. I also adapted the questions based on their role and experiences in the community. For instance, while I asked both teachers and parents about their understanding of parent engagement, I asked teachers to elaborate on their understanding of the roles of parents in their child's education. Comparatively, I asked parents to elaborate on the ways they were already engaged in their child's education as well as what other types of opportunities for engagement they would like to



see. Furthermore, I asked Latino immigrant parents about their migration stories and their experiences adapting to their new home in Montbello. The semi-structured interview protocols are included in Appendix A. These interviews allowed me to understand their perspectives on relationship-building, trust, and roles in educational contexts in Montbello more fully.

Although my dedication to building relationships with Montbello residents before the interviews led to rich conversations, it also presented a limitation to this study. During my interview process, I faced a challenge interviewing those that I did not already have relationships with, including African American parents. Because of the nature of online meetings, building trusting relationships with African American parents after the start of the pandemic was difficult. And due to the large workload on teachers and administrators during the pandemic, my requests to be connected to African American parents were largely unsuccessful. Therefore, I only have two interviews with individuals who identify as African American parents with children in Montbello schools. My focus in the study is on Latino families, who make up 83% of families in the school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). The teachers and administrators I spoke with also had a sense of the broader set of families that make up the school. But I recognize that perspectives from different parents would have added valuable context to my study. For example, their perspective could have provided examples of other spaces where a sense of belonging was being developed for these Black families in Montbello or of other practices that faculty engaged in that helped Black families feel more connected to DCISM. Furthermore, my interviews with African American community members were marked by the differences in positionality that may have shaped the interviews. These individuals may have associated me with the Latino community, with DCISM, or with my father in ways that may

have shaped what people were willing (or unwilling) to say. As such, I try to contextualize my claims—particularly ones about how parents experience the school—through this limitation.

### ***Document Analysis***

I collected a variety of documents including documents from DCISM, Denver Public School District, news sources and stories, local publications, and social media from community members. These include four key kinds of documents. First, I collected a broad variety of documents distributed by DCISM such as flyers and letters to parents. I read and cataloged these documents to support my understanding of how the school communicates with parents (and, perhaps, understands its role in that communication). Part of this document collection also included saved PDFs of Facebook posts with school events and announcements, as well as YouTube videos created by school administrators and parents. Second, I collected more than 20 documents authored and distributed by the district, including official policy memos, district websites, school board notes and resolutions, etc. These documents were downloaded or saved in a computer file organized by different emergent themes and patterns. These documents allowed me to develop a better understanding of how district policies and practices shape and influence local practices.

Third, I collected more than 70 news stories about Montbello, Denver, and education news in the district. These stories were mainly reported in local news outlets (*The Denver Post*, *Westword*), or local versions of national outlets (*Chalkbeat*). These stories focused on community efforts to improve the Montbello community, as well as stories on how the school district is negotiating changes to schools in the neighborhood and the district overall, helped me to understand the mainstream narratives that further shape the educational landscape. These stories provide a wider scope of how Montbello is perceived—and shaped—by popular media.

Fourth, I collected data from a local publication written by local actors and residents: MUSE, the local Montbello magazine. This magazine announced several initiatives under way in the community to improve the neighborhood and includes opinion articles of community members. This data allowed me to contextualize the news articles and juxtapose the mainstream stories with more local narratives.

Lastly, I collected around 15 documents posted through social media and sent through group emails by community members. Community members share and announce community events, as well as participate in advocacy through social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Posts that have explicitly called for community or parent engagement in community events, or those that have addressed issues in education or gentrification have been collected since 2018 and saved in a folder. I chose to follow social media accounts of organizations that have a wide outreach and post news relevant to Montbello. For example, the Montbello Organizing Committee posts about Montbello news and events and has 1.8K followers. I also followed local community leaders on Facebook, such as Hasira Ashemu, Brandon Pryor, and Jennifer Bacon and collected their posts pertaining to Montbello dynamics as they appeared on the social media platform. I chose these leaders because of their recognition as community leaders and activists and their posts on education in the Far Northeast. I read through these posts with an eye to understanding their perspective on the identity of Montbello and their vision for the neighborhood's schools.

### ***Participatory Methods***

As part of my research, I co-designed a participatory action element of my study. Torre and Ayala (2009) argue that participatory action research (PAR) collectives create new spaces and forms of relationships that run counter to traditional social hierarchies; these spaces create

passageways to new ideas and consciousness, or *entremundos*—“that by crossing you invite a turning point, initiate a change” (p. 389). In my study, I contend that using participatory methods contributed to a richer ethnographic account of education in Montbello, but also offered ways to make my research more “relevant and applicable to the local community,” and to have more potential for transformational change (Fuentes, 2013, p. 306).

Guided by these kinds of aims, I sought to explore contested narratives of parent and community engagement in partnership with a group of mothers at DCISM. This element of my study emerged from my work with DCISM’s monthly parent advisory meetings. These meetings, open to all parents, included group work sessions (which began after my involvement described later in this chapter) focused on improving an area of the school through parent collaboration. Any parent could join the work sessions at these meetings, and around 15-20 parents attended sessions on the topic they chose to address: parent engagement. I became involved in these meetings at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year when I attended solely as a participant observer. However, after the first meeting, both parents and school leaders requested my collaboration in improving parent engagement efforts. Specifically, DCISM faculty, like Mr. Silva and Ms. Perez, the family liaison, asked for my expertise in developing a more collaborative structure for parent engagement events. Parents also asked for my guidance to develop the parent engagement working group that sought to understand community needs and create engagement opportunities. In Chapter 8, I further outline how parents decided to conduct a research project and how I acted as a resource to help guide parents in the research process. The parents at these sessions decided on methodological tools to answer their research questions and to brainstorm survey questions. For example, the idea to create a survey to learn more about parent obstacles and needs related to engagement originated from the parents during a working

session in a parent advisory meeting. As a group of about 15 parents, we discussed what we wanted to learn about parents and brainstormed questions for the survey. Some of these questions were targeted at finding information that could help administrators plan their engagement efforts, such as:

- What is the best way to notify you of events?
- What are the obstacles that prevent your participation or attendance at school events?

Other questions were targeted at learning more about the types of opportunities for engagement parents were interested in, such as:

- What type of information would you like to receive at these events? (i.e., scholarships)  
Please suggest a topic: \_\_\_\_\_
- What types of participation opportunities would you like to see more of at school?

Then, in our early research group meetings, two mothers and I finalized the questions and other logistics surrounding the survey before it was sent out to families in a bilingual format through the school.

The fluid group of parents that met monthly during the parent advisory meetings slowly formed into a research group. By December of 2019, five parents—all immigrant mothers originally from Mexico and Central America—created “Madres de DCIS” and met twice a month. These mothers were individuals who regularly attended the parent advisory meetings and were interested in developing a stronger school-family partnership and encouraging more parents to participate in school activities and decision-making. After we received the survey results, two mothers and I analyzed the results of the survey. Before this meeting, I compiled and analyzed the quantitative component of the survey. However, the mothers assisted in the qualitative analysis, as they sifted through strips of paper that had survey responses written on them and categorized them into themes. The mothers and I found that many of the barriers to engagement were related to the way the school scheduled events and the busy lives that parents led.

Furthermore, we found that the types of opportunities for engagement parents wanted included a variety of activities:

- Activities hosted by the school for the community
- Academic activities
- Activities for students
- Better communication between teachers and parents
- Spending time with teachers, students, and parents
- Prevention for problems with health and mental health

The group Madres de DCIS presented the results of the survey and their analysis to faculty in December of 2019, which is outlined in more detail in Chapter 8. In summary, the mothers presented a case for more faculty commitment to engagement and developing authentic relationships with families. They also argued that building strong school-family relationships could break the cycle of teacher turnover, a problem in Montbello schools that deeply concerned the mothers. The plan for the spring of 2020 was to use survey data to create engagement opportunities that addressed the barriers and needs of parents. The mothers also wanted to survey teachers to understand their perspectives on engagement and develop a plan for the collaboration between the mothers and teachers to deepen school-family ties. However, because of Covid-19, the PAR work was paused until August of 2020.

At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, the district announced the creation of a comprehensive high school for Montbello, forcing the mothers to refocus their efforts; the mothers decided to pivot to advocacy work to ensure that their vision for Montbello schools was included in district decision-making. In this project, the mothers also created a plan to disseminate information about the closing of DCISM to the community. Their goal was—and continues to be—to provide a louder voice for the Latino community in the process of reshaping Montbello schools. Although this project steered us away from ethnographic methods, the mothers' bimonthly conversations over Zoom contributed to their analysis of power dynamics

within Montbello schools and their collective learning about the social factors that shape parent engagement. The mothers' reflections and discussions on the barriers of Covid-19, language, and the district avenues for engagement led them to more fully understand the state of trust and power in Montbello's educational landscape. Currently, the group consists of seven immigrant mothers and one staff member at DCISM who works with engaging Montbello families for the school. This staff member was invited by a mother and has built a close relationship with the rest of the mothers in the group.

This work was supported through my 2019-2020 Graduate Fellowship in Community-Based Research, awarded by CU Engage. This research is mostly compiled in Chapter 8 and is also integrated into the ethnographic collection of data. Drawing from third-world feminism, I approach PAR with the expectation that the mothers already possess the tools to struggle for social transformation, which were obtained through their struggle to survive. Therefore, the informal research meetings—which also served as spaces where mothers reflected on their experiences and negotiated their roles in schools—became key sites for data collection on parent perspectives. In addition to our collaborative data collection, I collected my own fieldnotes of the district meetings that the mothers and I participated in. However, central to my analysis are fieldnotes from our Madres de DCIS research meetings. Here, I follow traditions in PAR that emphasize the importance of informal and dialogical spaces, and sources of data (Dyrness, 2011). As Dyrness describes in her study, many of the most significant moments of learning or transformation happened in those spaces, rather than in formal interviews or other research activities. Similar to Dyrness' (2011) analysis and incorporation of PAR, these informal spaces shed light on the *process* of transformation, occurring not only through the mothers' work products and through policy goals, but through their collective learning in these reflective spaces.

Through this focus, *convivencia* was a central lens that allowed me to make sense of how building a community through this research space can lead to transformation. To obtain the mothers' insights into what it meant for parents to be a part of research, an advocacy project, and lead initiatives within the school environment, I interviewed 4 of the parent researchers individually during the participatory research process and I conducted a focus group or *plática* in February 2021. I conducted this *plática* after the mothers had experience with research and analysis and completed many of their advocacy goals. I recorded, transcribed, and wrote up fieldnotes after each interview and the *plática*. I also include several fieldnotes from phone call conversations I had with mothers as they discussed their experiences in district meetings and news about schools.

Because of the parents' outreach methods and willingness to collaborate with school administrators, the principal (and sometimes assistant principal) attended all research team meetings in the fall semester of 2019 and participated as members—not leaders—of the research team. Of course, they were always seen by our team through their roles as school leaders. But this positionality was an advantage, too. For instance, as the group learned about the school's context and position within Montbello, Mr. Silva offered essential information and valuable insights for the group yet stepped back as the parents took the lead in analyzing that information. However, the group reframed their goals in August of 2020 as we began online meetings, and the principal chose to stop attending the meetings. Part of the group's goal was to ensure that the new principal at the comprehensive high school was someone who shared their vision, understood their experiences, and opened the doors for their participation and collaboration. For the mothers, this meant that they wanted to advocate for Mr. Silva to continue to be their principal, or to be hired as the principal of the new comprehensive high school. Therefore, part



of their advocacy work focused on supporting the hiring of Mr. Silva to this position. As their focus developed in this direction, it was important that their efforts were independent from him.

This PAR work deepened and enriched my larger ethnographic research. Bejarano et al. (2019) describe how their participatory research with undocumented Latina researchers brought benefits to their project's approach to ethnography. They describe how these researchers, "opened up new avenues of inquiry that had not previously been a part of the research design," and viewed interviewing as an "opportunity to identify and advise people in trouble," contributing to "the decolonial thrust of their work" (p. 98-99). Similarly, in our research, the mothers were able to engage with Montbello stakeholders through their own experiences as Latin American immigrant women—and some of them, as undocumented individuals. Their experiences and interactions led to insights on the ways that these mothers navigated their relationships with community members and school faculty. Their perspectives, as shared during our research meetings, contributed to the "thickness" of my data and writing.

Furthermore, their participation provided an avenue for investigation that would not have been possible in ethnographic research on my own. As the mothers immersed themselves in district avenues for decision-making and participated in conversations with other stakeholders, the mothers made sense of their roles and shared their experiences and reflections with each other. This led to a collective learning experience that enriched my data on the divisions and fragmentation within Montbello, the ways that belonging could be created in and outside of schools, and the collective transformation possible through engagement efforts.

Finally, the PAR aspect of this research has the potential to serve decolonial ends. In a similar sense to what Bejarano et al. (2019) describe, community researchers took "the goals and methods of the project into their own hands and applied them toward their own ends" (p. 100).

Therefore, this research serves academic purposes *as well as* communal goals for the transformation of Montbello schools and the humanization and empowerment of the Latino immigrant community in Montbello. In particular, as our group developed, I saw my study as Abrego (2020)—a Salvadoran immigrant scholar— describes as a way of “accompanying others.” Abrego (2020) explains that such a repurposing of research—while nonetheless using the tools of academia—can be decolonizing:

I make the research process rewarding and more meaningful through accompaniment, by producing work that is more rigorous and verifiable, not only to the academic community, but—equally importantly—to my own immigrant community, as well. We do this work, we invest time and resources, and we wrestle with the words on the page to weave together stories that will make evident for readers the ways that their own lives, too, are framed within legal structures. When they can see that, and when they can apply that lens to resist in their own lives, out-of-place scholars have effectively used academic tools for justice and liberation. (p. 16-17).

### **Analysis**

I analyzed the data collected from my research using qualitative coding methods. I specifically drew on the extended case method, a qualitative, ethnographic coding method (Burawoy et al., 1991). This method allowed me to sift through data searching for patterns in everyday interactions and allowed me to build on existing theory. According to Burawoy et. al, (1991) this methodology of analysis allows me to connect methods/techniques to theory and turn observations into explanations, as well as data into theory (p. 5). This is done through examining how a social situation is shaped by external forces and how “personal troubles of the milieu” are connected “to the public issues of the social structure” (Burawoy et al., 1991, p. 6). I created

about 21 parent codes and wrote memos on each of these codes<sup>3</sup>. Some of these codes included: immigrant identity and experience, ideal relationship between school and community, fragmentation factors, etc. I triangulated my data sources by conducting observations, interviews, and analyzing district engagement policies. I also searched for disconfirming—and not only confirming—evidence. For example, in my interviews and fieldnotes, I anticipated that I would find evidence of *acompañamiento* as a factor that builds spaces of belonging in the school; however, I also found evidence that *acompañamiento* could be perceived as a divisive practice. These findings pushed me to reposition the role of *acompañamiento* and search for new theories on solidarity and cross-cultural relationship-building.

I employed this analytical method to my analysis of fieldnotes, interviews, focus groups, and documents. I read through the fieldnotes, searching for patterns and themes and coded the notes accordingly. I did the same with other ethnographic data to complement and connect these themes, seeking to create rich narratives for each theme. I used memos to help construct these narratives and develop the themes further. This work of uncovering themes and connecting these themes to my larger research questions allowed me to turn my observations and interpretations into explanations, theorized through key concepts from my framework (including distrust, political trust, and *acompañamiento*). However, this process also pushed me to distinguish areas that did not easily align with existing theory, connect data to other theories/explanations, as well as push back on some of the existing theories used in my work. For example, just as I reconsider the role of *acompañamiento* in DCISM, I also question whether a racial lens—commonly used to understand the divisions in Montbello—is an appropriate perspective for grasping the complexity of division and diversity in Montbello.

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B for a list of these codes.

## **Positionality and Politicized Trust**

As a daughter of Central American immigrants with similar life experiences as many of the Latino families I am collaborating with, and even more importantly as DCISM's principal's daughter, my positionality is central to my study. Indeed, my positionality brought forth complex topics to explore, as I navigated the power dynamics within the school, district, and neighborhood. My positionality demands that I critically reflect on my own multiple identities—as a Latina, as an emerging researcher, as the principal's daughter, as a former teacher, as a child of Salvadoran immigrants, a new mother—and how these identities enabled me to both see and miss aspects of this community. Likewise, participants also positioned me, and responded to me, through the lens of at least some of these identities. I explore these issues now, as I explain how I worked to develop trust and establish my roles as both researcher and beyond researcher.

Some scholars may argue that my positionality—and particularly my family relationships to the community—might mean that I am “too close” to the research to produce reliable results; however, I would argue that my positionality offers insights others would not have of the situation under study. Brayboy and Dehyle (2000) write about the researcher's dual position of insider/outsider and challenge the critique that insiders may miss out on analyses they take for granted or provide a distorted analysis by not being able to distance themselves from the data. In contrast, they argue that all ethnographers—whether “inside” or “outside” of the community—are part of the collection and part of the data:

The point here is that “insiders” writing ethnographic accounts of their own group have issues with which they must deal, but these issues do not mean they cannot conduct good, rigorous research. Rather, they must address the issues in a manner that shows integrity

and an awareness of some of the complicated issues facing them (Brayboy & Dehyle (2000, p. 166).

For Brayboy and Dehyle (2000), any researcher, however close to the community, needs to address their positionality with care, intentionality and integrity. Likewise, Diaz-Strong et. al (2014) write that there is no right way to negotiate tensions that come up during the research process, but the process of “publicly naming the complications when one is too close to the work is vital and potentially transformative” (p. 17).

In the case of my study, I aimed to be clear and specific about these complications, writing and exploring them as they occur. I came to see my positionality as more than just being simultaneously an insider/outsider. My intersecting identities provided several lenses through which I was able to interact with others and see myself through different eyes. In a borderlands tradition, allowing myself and the others I am working with *to be nos-otras* (Anzaldúa, 1987)—or to hold multiple, even opposing, identities—allows individuals to remain complicated and “to design research that asks questions and seeks knowledge at the intersections of everyday lived experience and intricate social systems” (Torre, 2009, p. 118). I also see my use of ethnographic approaches that situate and contextualize data as a resource for this reflection. For example, I embedded the words of my father within the larger context that shapes his work as a principal. Through the collection of fieldnotes, artifacts, and participating in community and school events, I was able to analyze the principal’s responses to reforms in the context of social and political factors that have affected this community. Especially when my father has espoused potentially deficit language, my critique includes—but also goes beyond—his individual views, to analyze how broader discourses and beliefs about parent engagement (ones from district policies, for example) have shaped his language and thinking. Furthermore, my close relationship with this

principal has allowed me more insight into the delicate decisions that must be made, and the many pressures he faces as a school leader. This perspective potentially adds complexity to my interpretations of situations that may be seen as simple from the outset. This relationship has also, I believe, allowed me to pose harder questions to him, ones that I may have been more circumspect in asking a different leader, or one that I knew less well. For instance, I was able to ask him fairly directed and pointed questions: “Why do you think it has been difficult to reach out to African-American community leaders?” Or, “how can the newcomer space you helped design at DCISM push beyond English-focused goals?”

Many researchers have written about how their positionality has enriched their research relationships or their research process. My own positionality as a Latina researcher has pushed me to think about what it means to work in a context with a majority Latino school, in a context of distrust with the larger district and, to certain extent, with other African American community members. My positionality is key to this study in multiple overlapping ways. I am a daughter of Salvadoran immigrants who has faced many similar struggles to the students and parents in this study. I am also married to a Mexican immigrant and this relationship has also facilitated and deepened many connections between Mexican families and myself. As a Latina scholar, I strived to be reflexive of my positionality and consistent in developing and maintaining politicized trust with Montbello residents and school staff throughout the research process.

As I have reflected on these dynamics, I have drawn inspiration from Sofia Villenas’s classic essay, “The Colonizer/Colonized Chicano Ethnographer.” In this essay, Villenas (1996), a Chicana ethnographer, writes about her own relationship with the Latino community and how her identity as a privileged ethnographer was being co-opted by the dominant English-speaking community to legitimize their deficit narrative of Latino parents. Villenas calls for a positioning

beyond the researcher-as-colonizer and calls ethnographers of color to “recognize their position as border-crossers and realize they are their own voices of activism” (p. 711). Villenas helped me to reflect on how my own identity (as a university-based researcher, as an immigrant’s daughter, as a parent) was taken up by both school administrators and parents. Furthermore, I question whether my participation in a collaborative project with parents may still reify power dynamics that position the principal and school faculty as a powerful audience, and parents as “consultants.”

One of the most influential aspects of my positionality has been my relationship to the principal. My status as the principal’s daughter adds another layer to the context of researcher-as-colonizer; my closest relationship is with the person who holds the most traditional form of authoritative power in the school. It is important to note that I have gained access to school leadership, the parent group, planning meetings, and other everyday practices in the school because of my relationship to the school principal. Limitations in my study because of my identity could include a lack of trust and openness from parents and other stakeholders. Therefore, building *politicized trust* with parents becomes a substantial priority in this research process. At the start of the research process with the group of parents, I became worried that my status as daughter of the principal would make parents uncomfortable with me or would see me as someone they could not trust. However, as the project has continued, I noticed that this aspect of my positionality has, in reality, allowed for more trust to develop. For example, during one school meeting with the school advisory board, one parent approached me and thanked me for coming to the meeting. She said, “Gracias por apoyar a su papá y gracias por apoyarnos a nosotros” [Thank you for supporting your dad and for supporting us] (fieldnotes, October 7, 2019). Contrary to my fears, I have found that my participation in meetings with parents has

often facilitated the development of trust, both between parents and myself, and, interestingly, with parents and my father. Latino parents see my collaboration with the school and their parent group as a family endeavor and as a sign of dedication from my father and myself to the community. This emphasis on family as a sign of dedication can be seen in this excerpt from my field notes from a festival held in Montbello:

Lorena, a mom that was at the tent, walked past us and saw me. I stood up to tell her hello and we greeted with a hug and a side cheek kiss. I introduced my mom to her and Lorena said, “Ah, yo siempre tuve curiosidad de saber cómo era la esposa del Señor Silva. Siempre la quise conocer. Mucho gusto” [Ah, I’ve always had the curiosity of knowing what Mr. Silva’s wife was like. I’ve always wanted to meet you. It’s nice to meet you.] My mom shyly shook hands with her. Lorena invited my mom to other school events and said that she would be glad to see her there. She then invited us to go over to her tent and that we could win prizes if we played *lotería*. (fieldnotes, September 21, 2019).

In this excerpt, the mother demonstrates the value of having the principal’s family be involved, or just even being present, at school events. For Lorena, a mother who I would later have a strong relationship with due to our participation in *Madres de DCIS*, knowing Mr. Silva’s family could be a sign of a breaking down of traditional professional boundaries and a more humanizing approach to building relationships. Therefore, instead of my collaboration being an obstacle in building trust, it served as a catalyst for trust-building among Latino families.

My identity as a new mother also allowed me to bond with others. When I visited the school, administrators, teachers, and parents asked me about how I was feeling and shared their own stories of their children with me. A popular question was my due date (I was expecting my



first child throughout most of the 2019-2020 school year). Especially after the start of Covid-19, many showed concern about how I was doing. This is one exchange at the close of one interview with Ms. Gray, a former administrator at DCISM:

Ms. Gray: So, when's your due date? I know you told me three times.

A: May 2nd.

G: Oh, you are coming up!

A: Yes, I have like a month left...

G: Oh my gosh yeah and you need to be staying out of everywhere probably as much as your grandparents.

These types of exchanges with those involved in my research were common as we shared concern for each other. But my pregnancy and new motherhood was special in my connection with the Latina mothers in my research. These mothers always asked me about my pregnancy, and after my daughter was born, the Latina mothers I engaged with always asked me about her before our Zoom meetings started or after our interviews concluded. For example, as we were closing our conversation during an interview, a Mexican mother said, “Ya sabes, cualquier cosa también aquí estamos y un saludo a toda tu familia y un abrazo a la bebé [You already know, whatever you need, we are here too and send my regards to all your family and a hug to your baby] (Aguilar, interview, September 10, 2020).

I believe my new motherhood was perceived as a transition in identity or role for me by many individuals in my research. An exchange with Donna Garnett demonstrates the ways that others perceived how new motherhood could change my perspective:

DG: I admire you for, you know moving on with your PhD and taking on the questions around education and gentrification and being a mom at same time. Bless you.

A: Yeah, thank you, thank you.

G: Then you're gonna have even more personal investment in terms of what schools are doing.

Being a new mother could therefore be another connection to my research on parent and family engagement. However, the Latin American immigrant mothers still did not see me as one of them. Instead, they perceived me to have a similar experience as their children, as someone who grew up in the U.S., something that has unshakably altered our experiences and identity as second-generation immigrants. I am not a first-generation immigrant like them who faced the barriers of language or having an undocumented status. Their perception of me as an outsider to their experiences can be seen in an interview with Lorena, a Central American mother, when she spoke of her surprising change of accent as she began to spend more time with Mexicans. I then shared how my own accent had changed after marrying my Mexican husband and she disagreed, “no, y luego que usted nació aquí, entonces eso es otro...es diferente. [no, but you were born here, so that is another...that is different.] (L., interview, April 14, 2020). Furthermore, in another interaction with Juana, a Central American mother as well, commented during her interview, “Hay diferentes tipos de inmigrantes y no sé, ustedes que han crecido aquí, a veces les cuesta entender. [There are different types of immigrants and I don’t know if you all who grew up here, it is difficult for you to understand] (J., interview, April 23, 2020). Even though I have much in common with these mothers, to them, I was still someone who was profoundly shaped by my experiences growing up in the U.S. My border-crossing experiences were different than theirs, something that still made me an outsider.

Allowing these identities to be the sole driver of my relationship-building would not be enough to build *politicized trust* (Vakil, et. al., 2016). Like Torre (2009) argues, it is necessary to

“position ourselves at all times in relation to the material before us, allowing our multiple fluid identities to move us between what seemed like ‘natural’ identity-based alliances to more politically-based alliances” (p. 117). I also had to demonstrate that I was accountable to the parents in the research, even more than I was accountable to the school. This type of trust began to develop through ensuring that parents were involved in every aspect of the research and that they decided who to share their findings with, especially when school faculty, such as the parent liaison, asked me for updates on the research or for preliminary results of the survey. With the parents’ consultation and their decision-making within the research process, the parents knew that they are truly the owners of the data, and school leaders must collaborate directly with the parents to have access to the data.

Knowing when to act and when to stay on the sidelines has also been part of the process of building politicized trust within the parent research team. Several incidents pushed me to think of myself as beyond a researcher. For instance, in August of 2019, I sat at a table in the back of the room as about 30 parents shared their concerns and hopes for the new school year during a DCISM parent advisory meeting. Many were voicing their opinions on what they would like to see changed or improved. I listened intently, writing fieldnotes and observing the room. However, I was called to act in a way that I was not expecting during the meeting. Instead of doing traditional participant observation—where I sat and participated intermittently with mostly staying silent—I was asked to draw from my expertise and act as consultant:

“[A mother] then chimed in and said that there should also be a campaign with mentors for the students. She described this idea to the rest of the parents in the room. Then out of nowhere, Mr. Silva looked at me and asked “¿Qué crees? ¿Qué opinión tienes? [What do you think? What opinion do you have?]” And everyone looked at my direction. I

switched gears and I said that I was noticing two different themes here and that I proposed they talk about increasing parent engagement and bullying in two different committees. I suggested that these committees could meet at the next meeting to come up with ideas. At the end of the meeting, they could summarize some of their plans to the rest of the parent group. I explained that these two committees could end up helping each other out on their mission. Mr. Silva asked “So make 2 committees?” And I said, “Es una idea. [It’s an idea.]” And several of the parents nodded.” (fieldnotes, August 6, 2019)

This interaction interrupted my expectations to be just an observer and to participate in a more unobtrusive way in the parent meetings. Instead of being just a bystander, I was asked to give my opinion and to give suggestions about the structure of the meetings, altering the way that future parent advisory meetings were held.

These types of interactions slowly built deeper relationships over time, and parents felt comfortable asking for my expertise and collaboration outside of my expectations as a researcher. Several mothers in the parent group have asked me to attend other community activism meetings and to help with community discussions. One mother also asked if I could act as consultant for her new community organization. Although I did not have the bandwidth to work with her at the time, we both agreed that I could begin the work in June of 2021. The push for me to act as more than just a simple bystander or observer has been obvious from the start, something that has altered the line of events in DCISM.

My decision to collaborate in the ways I was being asked to participate is a different orientation to social science research. In traditional research, researchers may be pressured to analyze situations from a neutral or objective position, prioritizing distance (Nzinga, 2018; Green, 2014). However, my decision to “step up” pushed me to reflect on my political

commitments and my goals for the participatory research I was engaged in (Ventura & Wong 2019). After the positive and open reaction of parents in this meeting, I anticipated that participatory research was possible in this space and that parents were willing to work collaboratively towards a common goal. Doing participatory research was something I was hoping to integrate into my research for my dissertation, albeit without imposing this form of participation on parents. This interaction was a sign that there was space for participatory research and that my positionality could leverage access to building relationships and disrupting power for a research team to emerge.

Even though “stepping up” represents a large ask for my time and effort, I see it as part of forming a mutual relationship of care and respect. Furthermore, our research group continues to meet, even though my research for my dissertation is now completed. Figueroa (2014) writes that, “calling into question the notion of exiting the field will encourage us to break down the artificial distance between the researcher and researched and force us to examine whether our existing methods honor the humanity that we share with our research participants, colleagues, and students,” (p. 143). Continuing my work with these mothers is part of my accountability to them and part of honoring the humanity in my methods. These calls to act from school leaders and from parents have pushed me to think about my actions as a form of solidarity with the parents and my role *beyond* being a researcher. Building trust and solidarity is key in having the dedication to act in ways that may seem to violate the rules of maintaining distance in traditional research (Nzinga, 2018). As scholars have argued, building personal connections and working to have an impact on communities may require an exploration and a development of political solidarity and actions that push researchers to take on roles beyond “researcher” (Ventura & Wong, 2019; Green, 2014). My positionality in the research has allowed me to build trusting

relationships in a contentious environment where distrust is rampant. In this kind of environment, politicized trust is even more essential, as are efforts towards humanizing and collaborative research (Vakil et. al., 2016).

Although I have described the positive ways that my positionality has granted me access and allowed me to build relationships and trust, my identity has also positioned me in ways that have limited this study. Notably, I believe my identity—and how I am positioned in the community—may have led me to miss opportunities to build relationships with African American parents. The racial dynamics in Montbello prohibited me from building close relationships with African American parents in the same way that I did with Latin American immigrant parents. I have also questioned if, in the context of Montbello’s racial divisions, a collaborative project with mostly Mexican and Central American immigrants may have ended up exacerbating racial divisions between parents in the school. My positionality in the school has allowed for deeper relationships with Latino families to develop, mostly because of our shared racialized and border-crossing experiences, and by being able to speak Spanish. However, this can leave out other African American parents from participating in the research. My collaboration in the research may have had the influence of pushing African American parents away, a similar barrier to my difficulty in building enough trust to interview African American parents. Paying attention to these power dynamics influenced by my own positionality forces me to think about how participating and designing participatory research must also include acts of cross-cultural/racial solidarity to build politicized trust.

### **Chapter III: Who Is Montbello?**

As I drove into Montbello to visit DCISM, I passed by my favorite stretch of Montbello's 8.5 mile system of canals—a section with a vibrant mural of roses and the words “Home Sweet Montbello” along the slanted concrete. Next to that canal is a green sign that says, “Welcome to Montbello: Beautiful Mountain” and underneath, in large bold letters, the words: “DIGNITY, PRIDE, DIVERSITY.” These signs and artwork hint at Montbello's history of diverse residents and the colorful ways that residents show pride in their community. In this chapter, I attempt to outline an answer to “Who is Montbello?”, a complex question that, to answer, must include a deep understanding of the history behind Montbello's identity, the centrality of neighborhood schools, and the fragmentation of the community. I document the recent demographic changes, pressures from gentrification, and school initiatives that have fragmented the community and its schools, leading to a climate of distrust in Montbello. Throughout, I will emphasize how space and place are racialized, which in Montbello is complex as it is not simply a binary of white/black imaginaries, but includes immigrant visions for community. I argue that defining divisions as a purely racial phenomenon hides community complexities and obfuscates the potential for schools to heal these divisions. I suggest that to understand this climate in Montbello, we must understand the struggle over its schools. Likewise, to understand the distrust in Montbello schools, we must have a historical understanding of the community of Montbello. Finally, I point to how the creation of a new or revamped identity for a new Montbello comprehensive high school is an attempt to maintain control and lay claims over the neighborhood as residents answer the question: Who Is Montbello?

#### **Montbello: Dignity, Pride, and Diversity**

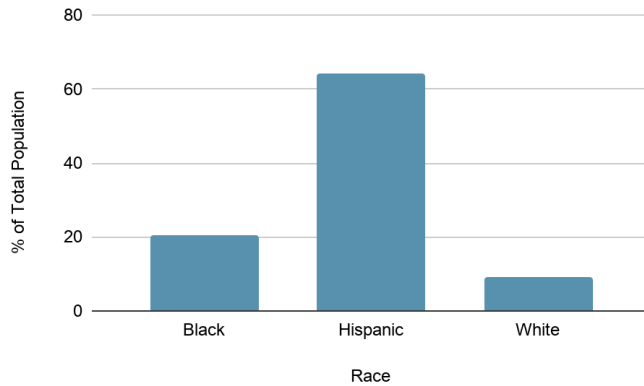
Montbello is a neighborhood close to the open plains area on Denver’s perimeters and was one of the last developed areas of the city. It is a part of the Far Northeast Region, as commonly referred to in larger district and city conversations, which also includes the adjacent Green Valley Ranch neighborhood. However, Montbello operates as—and was designed to be—an independent community (LeFebre, 2020). The Montbello neighborhood stands on what used to be mostly open space for cattle ranching until 1965, when a 2,932-acre area of land was released for purchase to residential, commercial, and industrial park developers to create a “self-supporting ‘City within a City’” (Thomas, 1976a). The Montbello community was projected to include “extensive shopping facilities” and a population of 40,000 by 1975 (Thomas, 1976a). By 1991, in a community-led plan for Montbello and Green Valley Ranch neighborhoods, Montbello was referred to as “a unique place because of mountain views, parks, and open spaces; it was unique because of the diverse people who called Montbello home and because of the excellent neighborhood schools” (LeFebre, 2020).

Montbello is a neighborhood that can be described as both diverse and segregated. According to progressive ideals of diversity, integration—which relies on the presence of white residents—is essential to build a better democracy (Anderson, 2013). According to this definition of diversity, this community may not be perceived as diverse—indeed, it could be segregated. Montbello is a majority community of color with 64.1% of the population identifying as Hispanic and 20.6% identifying as Black; only 9.2% of residents are white with no Hispanic background (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

## **Figure 2**

*Montbello Racial Demographics in 2019*



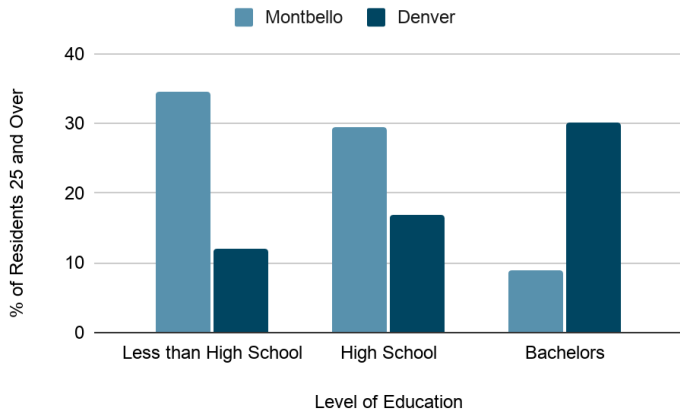


However, residents in Montbello decenter whiteness as they continue to describe their community as diverse. For them, their community’s diversity does not rely on the presence of white residents. For example, the neighborhood is diverse in that it also has residents that have migrated from all over the world; 29.7% of the population is foreign born (U.S. Census, Bureau, 2019). This is a larger share than other neighborhoods in Denver, where foreign born residents make up 15% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). This diversity is celebrated by the community, as is portrayed in their city signs and local celebrations (Vaccarelli, 2016).

Residents in the neighborhood are generally less educated than the rest of Denver as a whole. For example, 34.6% of Montbello residents 25 and over have not completed high school compared to only 12% of Denver residents who are 25 and over.

**Figure 3**

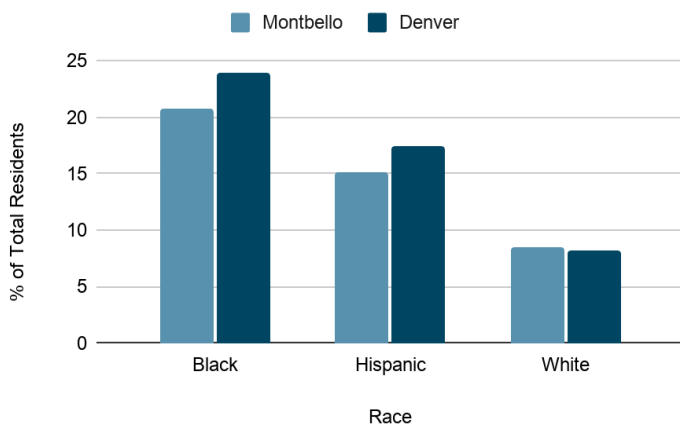
*Comparison of Educational Attainment Between Montbello and Denver residents in 2019*



However, it seems that Montbello is similar to the rest of Denver economically. In Montbello, 13% of residents have an income below poverty level, compared to 9% of Denver residents. When broken down by race, Montbello actually saw fewer Black and Hispanic residents reporting poverty status in the last 12 months (Black: 20.7% and Hispanic: 15.1%) compared to Denver’s Black residents (24%) and Hispanic residents (17.5%). White Montbello residents reported poverty status at about the same levels as Denver.

**Figure 4**

*Poverty Status in Last 12 Months (2019) in Montbello and Denver*



This may be a sign that Montbello is a promising place for Black and Latino families seeking economic stability, further positioning Montbello as a place where diversity can flourish.

The resident pride in a diverse Montbello has been present almost since the inception of the neighborhood. According to Marjorie Ledell<sup>4</sup>, a white resident who moved to Montbello in the 1970s, the newly developed neighborhood was marketed as a multiracial and multi economic neighborhood. In an interview with me, Ledell explained that developers marketed the neighborhood in this way to appeal to home buyers and to Denver’s wider image of diversity: “[Denver is] a multiracial city. That’s going to be one of the things you’re going to tell the Planning Commission and the City Council is, you know, we will help enrich your city and diversify it...So I imagine they thought it was a good marketing tool, more specifically, for the City of Denver.” Ledell doubted, however, that, “they would have used that as a marketing tool for the city of Littleton or Cherry Creek,” more affluent neighborhoods in Denver (M. Ledell, interview, February 5, 2021).

Lured in by this progressive vision, she moved with her husband and small children to Montbello. Montbello was also appealing to an emerging Black middle class, especially after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to the need for equal access to better housing, employment, and education (LeFebre, 2020). However, according to former resident Ledell, the diversity promised for Montbello was not immediately evident. Although in 1970, 91.3% of residents were white and 6.3% were Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 1970), Ledell reported that the city of Denver was planning on a “large number of Section 8<sup>5</sup> housing in Montbello,” (M. Ledell, interview, February 5, 2021). This meant that more low-economic families would move into the neighborhood. Furthermore, through her participation in her son’s elementary school, Ledell began to notice that most incoming residents did not reflect the multiracial and multi

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<sup>4</sup> Formerly Marjorie Null

<sup>5</sup> A federal housing choice voucher program for assisting very low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled to afford decent, safe, and sanitary housing in the private market.

economic development marketed by developers. At first, she believed white flight was the primary reason for why the multiracial goals for the neighborhood were not being met. However, with the guidance of Joe Battle, a Black civic activist from Chicago, she found that there may be “panic peddling<sup>6</sup> and racial steering<sup>7</sup>” occurring in the neighborhood (M. Ledell, interview, February 5, 2021). To find evidence of this, she put together a diverse group of couples to audit the real estate market for Montbello. This group consisted of 12 white couples, 6 Black couples, and 6 Latino couples who posed as prospective homebuyers and compared experiences. The group found that all the white prospective home buyers were not being referred to Montbello, yet the Black and Hispanic home buyers were being referred to Montbello or “a certain part of Aurora.” She related that, “Joe Battle was like, ‘Well, this isn't right.’ And we're thinking, yeah, sure isn't right because people aren't choosing where they want to live”. (M. Ledell, interview, February 5, 2021). In light of this information, segregation in Montbello seemed to be a result of *de jure* segregation, hidden through quiet marketing and real estate practices.

Potentially as a result of this panic peddling and racial steering, Montbello began to take form as a segregated community of color instead of a multiracial community. Donna Garnett, a current community leader, similarly explained this shift in the history of Montbello:

But as people were either pushed out or sought to flee the city, Montbello was appealing. Relatively large lots, nice, lots of brick houses in Montbello—bigger houses than what they could afford. So, it has been a community that's been very appealing to others moving out of the core of the city. So, what started out as—I would say—

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<sup>6</sup> illegal practice of inducing people in a neighborhood to sell their homes, by making them believe that members of a minority group are likely to buy property in and around their residential area.

<sup>7</sup>the practice in which real estate brokers guide prospective home buyers towards or away from certain neighborhoods based on their race.

predominantly a white and African American community 54 years ago, after about 15 years became more predominantly an African American population. (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020)

As a result of these discriminatory housing practices, along with the appeal of Montbello for other families moving out of central Denver, the neighborhood demographics quickly changed. By 1980, 45.5% or half of the population was African American, and by 1990, the African American community consisted of 59.7% of the population, transforming Montbello into a largely African American community<sup>8</sup> (U.S. Census Bureau, 1980; 1990).

Throughout the Denver area, Montbello became widely known as an African American community. Ms. Gray, an assistant principal at DCISM until 2019, explained that throughout her youth, Montbello “was known as one of the Black communities within the city of Denver” (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). Additionally, a strong tradition of Black organizing, with organizations such as the Struggle of Love Foundation and the Montbello Organizing Committee, transformed the neighborhood into a hub for the African American community. However valuable to African American residents, a community largely inhabited by individuals of color tends to garner a negative reputation. As scholars have demonstrated, these spaces for nonwhite residents are devalued as they are racialized in ways that perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black communities (Harris, 1993; Mills, 1997; Lipsitz, 2007). In Montbello’s case, the media widely portrayed Montbello as a crime-ridden neighborhood, which continues to be a part of the neighborhood’s reputation today. Montbello has been described as having a problem of “gangs, crime, and blight” (Gurule, 2011), and crime has been cited as a reason why large supermarkets will refuse to open in the neighborhood (Roberts, 2017). Youth violence is

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<sup>8</sup> These changes are also depicted in Figure 5, later in this chapter.

also a problem and impacts neighborhood schools. For example, several teens were killed in Montbello in 2020 (Lizarraga & Campbell-Hicks, 2020; Salinger, 2020), and in 2019, Mr. Silva, the principal at DCISM, attended a wake for a former student killed in Montbello. Even faculty at DCISM, such as Ms. Melendez, viewed Montbello as dangerous before she worked in the area. She recollected how, “growing up, I just remember like we would never go to Montbello because there is so much violence...So I mean, that's about all I knew about Montbello” (Melendez, interview, April 3, 2020).

Montbello residents consistently push back on this racialized narrative of Montbello as crime ridden. For instance, Angelle Fother, president of the Montbello Organizing Committee, countered these stereotypes in a 2016 media interview about the 50th anniversary of the neighborhood. She noted, “I find that people want to come out here and talk about crime. It’s not a bad neighborhood...There’s crime everywhere, but if that’s all that’s reported, we’re reinforcing stereotypes.” (Vaccarelli, 2016). Similarly, in the same story, the diversity of Montbello was highlighted to challenge the neighborhood’s prevalent negative portrayal:

It’s a neighborhood that has undergone vast changes in its 50 years and has suffered from lack of attention and at times a bad reputation. But many residents of Montbello would tell you that they are living in a hidden gem with a strong and diverse population that is looking to improve the health and wellness of its community (Vaccarelli, 2016).

These statements interestingly challenge negative portrayals of the neighborhood; often by noting a sense of neighborhood pride in its diversity. Instead of highlighting the community as a hub for African Americans, community leaders and residents emphasize its diversity, highlighting the potential for solidarity across racial and cultural groups in Montbello. However, maintaining a unified identity—as a diverse community—instead of as a historically African

American neighborhood remains a challenge, especially when demographic shifts and recent gentrification pressures from the larger Denver area have changed the face of the neighborhood once again. Next, I describe how the changing demographics in Montbello contribute to what community leaders have termed as the Black/Brown Divide.

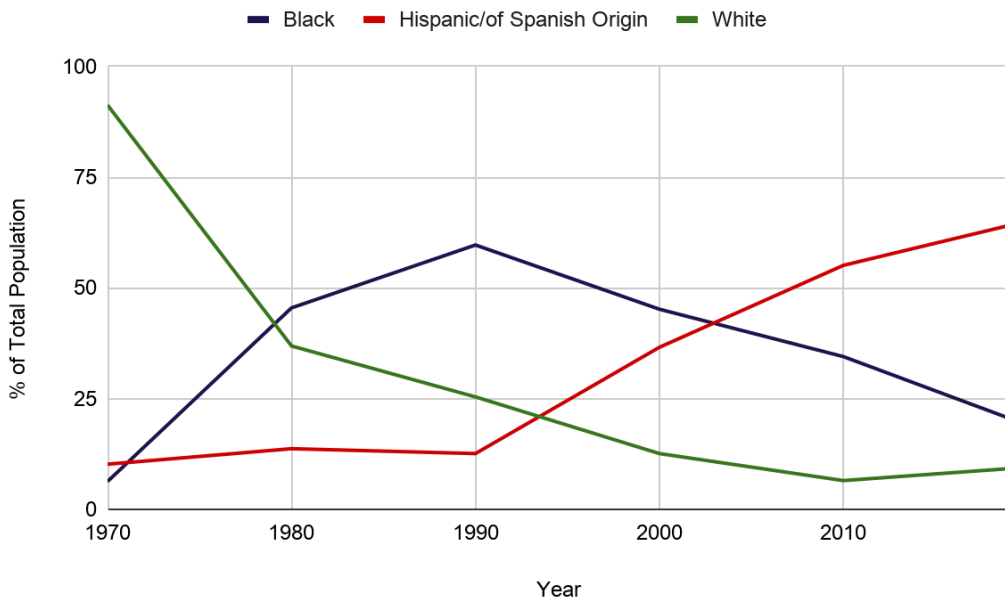
### ***Fragmenting Montbello: Black/Brown Divide***

In the last two decades, the Latino population has replaced the African American community as the majority racial group in Montbello. In 2019, Latinos made up 64% of residents and Black residents made up 20.6% of the neighborhood population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). The growth of the Latino population is in large part due to an increasing amount of Latin American immigrants moving to the area. The population of foreign-born residents was at 23% in 2000 and grew to 33% in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2010). In 2019, most of these foreign-born residents, 88.8% of them, migrated from Latin American countries. At the same time, many longstanding Black residents moved to the neighboring community, Green Valley Ranch (GVR), in part because of their upward mobility. Garnett described this shift to the nearby GVR community, noting that even though Black residents were “moving up in both their economic status as well as their educational level, they don't want to move too far away from their family and their community,” (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020). Therefore, this outbound and inbound movement in the last 20 years contributed to what Garnett called, “the shift toward a Latino population” (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020). In 2000, 45.2% of residents were Black and 36.6% of residents were Hispanic. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). By 2010, Latinos were the majority racial group while the Black population continued to decrease; the percentage of Black residents dropped to 34.5% in 2010; the Hispanic population rose to 55.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This trend continued and by 2019, the Black population was

down to 20.6% and the Hispanic population rose (although at a slower rate) to 64.1% of the neighborhood population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). These long-term trends are portrayed in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**

*Racial Demographic Change in % of Total Population Over Time in Montbello*



These demographic shifts in Montbello were precipitated by wider patterns of gentrification in Denver and the relative affordability of housing in Montbello. In 2019, a national study reported that Denver had the highest occurrence of Latino displacement as a result of gentrification and had a larger number of rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods (Roberts, 2019). Latino residents pushed out of other areas could find Montbello appealing, which in 2017, was ranked the “hottest” suburban housing market in the country and “stood out in pace of sales and how quickly home prices were appreciating” (Svaldi, 2017). Even with such rapid appreciation, Montbello remains “one of the few pockets of affordability left” in the metro area, with the



median price of a home being \$275,000, which was 47 percent below the \$519,000 median home price in the overall metro area in 2017 (Svaldi, 2017).

Residents and community leaders who wish to see the community intact are worried about gentrification in Denver that could press still more changes in Montbello. In a widely publicized local news article about gentrification in Denver, Mike Cortés, the director for CLLARO, a local advocacy and research organization, explained that his organization moved to Montbello to better serve their displaced constituents and expressed concerns that Montbello could be next to gentrify (Roberts, 2019). Furthermore, he explained, residents are wary of outside investors with their eye on Montbello:

I hear anecdotal reports of speculators coming in...They're keeping an eye on the new P light-rail station, its close proximity to P. Boulevard and the airport, and the rising real estate market in general. It's not rising quite as fast as it had been, but it's still going up as opposed to down — and my sense is that Montbello is being targeted by folks who would ultimately like to make some money and, in the course of doing that, they may change the demographic makeup of the neighborhood, intentionally or not (Roberts, 2019).

These potential investors may view Montbello as a perfect location to capitalize on the exchange value of the community (Lipsitz, 2007). In other words, urban investors could capitalize on the racialized “renewal” or “redemption” of this nonwhite neighborhood, which could raise the value of white-owned properties and further exclude long-term residents, as well as newer residents who have fled gentrification pressures in other neighborhoods (Mills, 1997; Lipsitz, 2007).

In addition, gentrification in Denver has led to a perceived fragmentation of African American communities. Brandon Pryor, a Black leader and activist, described how gentrification across Denver has particularly affected the Black community:

And with gentrification, you could look at East Denver. The Eastside, Park Hill, Montbello, Green Valley Ranch, the whole I-70 corridor. We don't have a Black community anymore. Trying to address our needs is hard because we're scattered (B. Pryor, interview, August 28, 2020).

Pryor highlights the breaking up of Black communities in Denver, a trend that is heightened by gentrification. I choose to describe Montbello as a community facing gentrification *pressures*—rather than facing gentrification itself. Montbello is a community that has received residents displaced by gentrification in other neighborhoods. However, the presence of gentrification (in other aspects of the city) shape perceptions of community in Montbello and the demographic changes in the community exacerbated by displacement may possibly be perceived as a consequence of gentrification that impacts Montbello. With gentrification looming over Montbello and the demographic changes of the last 20 years, the centrality of the African American experience in Montbello has challenged. For example, Ms. Thompson highlighted the impact of these demographic shifts:

When the neighborhood first started, it was predominantly African American. It could be maybe the racial division comes from the fact that maybe African Americans feel like they're being shut out when they've been pushed out of the community. And so they feel alienated in the community itself (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020).

Ms. Thompson's comments reveal a potential struggle around belonging and identity for many long-time African American Montbello residents, particularly as Montbello has served as a hub for the African American community in Denver. With the move towards a majority Latino population, Black residents may feel a loss of identity and a slipping grasp of the sense of community they have always valued. Other Montbello residents are also aware of these

dynamics, and the potential losses. Juana, a Central American resident of Montbello for 10 years, highlights the centrality of the African American experience in the Montbello community:

De la parte de la comunidad afroamericana aquí en Montbello, ellos fueron los dueños y es difícil sacar a alguien de su casa. Y esta es la casa de ellos y por eso ellos se sienten propietarios de eso. [For the African American community, they were the owners and it's difficult to kick someone out of their home. And this is their home and that is why they feel they are owners of this.] (J., interview, April 23, 2020).

Juana indicates how she perceived the neighborhood to be “owned” by the Black community and how the demographic shift may feel like “kicking someone out of their home.” This response demonstrates how racialized struggles for belonging shape conversations of Montbello’s identity.

The demographic shift towards a more Latin American immigrant population has not, however, solidified a new, distinctly “Latino Montbello” identity. One potential reason is that the new Latino community lacks a strong political voice in the neighborhood. Latino organizations in Montbello are scarce and few Latino organizers collaborate with many of the stronger, long-standing community organizations. For example, the Montbello Organizing Committee (MOC), which organizes community unity events and services, primarily works with Black community members. Jaqui, a Mexican immigrant and former MOC staff member, revealed that in many organization meetings she was typically the only Latina organizer present (fieldnotes, November 18, 2019). I contend that the Montbello Latino community may experience less political clout because of a lack of space to claim Montbello as their community. Primarily, Latin American immigrants may not feel they can share in a Montbello identity because of the challenges for immigrants in forging a new identity linked to their new home. When asked about whether they

feel that Montbello is home to them, Jaqui said: “Es esa sensación de que sólo... transitamos. Estamos aquí, pero nuestro corazón no está al 100% aquí. [It’s that feeling that we’re ... just passing through. We’re here, but our heart is not 100% here.]” (J., interview, April 14, 2020). This feeling of *ni de aquí ni de allá*, a popular saying among Latino immigrants who feel they lack a home as a result of their migration experiences, can constrain them from laying down deep roots in Montbello. Although this stance includes a struggle for belonging, it also forces immigrants to navigate *between* contexts, which has the potential to challenge ideas of assimilation and expand existing theories of cultural identity (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2019).

Furthermore, the political climate of the U.S. overwhelmingly sends the message that immigrants—especially Mexican and Central American immigrants—are not wanted. The U.S. election in 2016 saw Trump build his campaign around “vilifying Mexican immigrants, and the policies of the early Trump administration, [which] laid bare the extent of anti-immigrant and white nationalist sentiment in the U.S.” (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 2). Some of these policies and actions have directly impacted immigrant communities through attempts to cancel DACA and TPS (which allows some Central Americans to stay in the U.S. legally), and expanded deportation raids. This precarious political context and exclusion from national belonging and citizenship contributes to a feeling of alienation in their new community. Furthermore, scholars have found that undocumented immigrants often do not feel they have a right to fight for educational rights or resources (Meloni, et al, 2017; Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014), especially since fear and stigma of immigration status are both barriers to claims-making (Abrego, 2011). Consequently, the Latino immigrant community in Montbello may face difficulty seeing the neighborhood as a place where they belong.

These differences and dynamics have led to divisions between the Latino and Black communities in Montbello; ones obvious enough that community leaders refer to this phenomenon as *the Black/Brown Divide*. For example, Garnett said that her organization was “really thoughtful about the racial tension and cultural tension—we call it in our community, *the Black/Brown divide*” (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020). By coining this term, community leaders point to the *racialization* of their differences. In other words, the defining feature of the divisions are around race (rather than, say, class, language, immigration status, length of time in the community, or other aspects of difference).

I suggest that these divisions have contributed to a fragmented Montbello community. Ms. Thompson describes this sense of fragmentation:

As a parent and now as a Denver public schools employee, and just as a community member, I just really want for Montbello to be bonded again. And I think the bonds have been broken. Trust is the issue. And I just really want us to hopefully be able to figure out a way to have Montbello come back together as one. Because as one, we’re strong. All these multiple personalities we have is so broken that everything is just...it’s just the best for “us”. But I want us to all be under one umbrella again and I think that will basically make this community thrive so much more than it used to (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020).

For Ms. Thompson, fragmentation has negatively affected the community in ways that make Montbello feel “broken,” and like it has “multiple personalities.” She also highlights that such broken bonds have contributed to distrust among community members. For her, creating a unifying identity, one where everyone is “under one umbrella again” can help to heal divisions.

Other leaders also aspire to achieve this goal. For example, MUSE, the Montbello magazine, is now a bilingual publication. Pryor, a Black community leader, has shared statements in solidarity with Latinos. For example, in a Black Lives Matter meeting on the Montbello school campus where they were discussing needs for Black students, Pryor said students and schools needed to plan together for more classes and more resources to address inequities for Black *and* Brown students (fieldnotes, February 5, 2020). Similarly, Garnett designed the Montbello Organizing Committee to be representative of the Montbello community, with both Black and Latino staff (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020). However, creating a unified identity has proved to be challenging. These attempts are overpowered by existing structural factors, like gentrification, that fragment the community and exacerbate racialized divisions in the neighborhood. Notably, one way that Montbello has attempted to address fragmentation has been through its schools. In the next section, I describe how central schools are to questions and debates about “who” the Montbello community is.

### **Schools: Pride of Montbello**

Montbello’s schools, particularly the former Montbello High School, have played a central role in shaping a Montbello identity. This role is typical of many schools in urban, long-standing African American communities. Siddle-Walker (1996) documents how Black segregated schools had a mutually dependent relationship with their communities and shared a collective vision. She challenges common perceptions that these schools put students at a disadvantage and suggests that, “the environment of the segregated school had affective traits, institutional policies, and community support that helped black children learn in spite of the neglect their schools received from white school boards,” (p. 3). Likewise, Ewing (2018) describes how a historically Black community in Chicago strived to honor the “the everyday

moments that make a school a place of care, a home, a site of history,” (p. 51). She argues that in current contexts of school closures in African American communities, residents feel the need to fight to keep their school:

A fight for a school is never just about a school. A school means the potential for stability in an unstable world, the potential for agency in the face of powerlessness, the enactment of one’s own dreams and visions for one’s own children. Because whether you’re in Detroit or Austin or Louisiana or Chicago, you want to feel that your school is *your* school. That you have some say in the matter, that your choice can make a difference” (Ewing, 2018, p. 47).

According to these scholars, a school is more than an academic institution; it is a home where everyone has “a say,” a site of belonging. I argue that Montbello residents wish to see their schools fulfill this role. I next point to the history of Montbello High School and its role in shaping a Montbello identity and how, even long after its closing, it continues to influence debates about “who” Montbello is, and how schools might reflect the needs of the community.

### ***Montbello High: Creation***

Montbello’s high school was established during the end of the 1970s, when Montbello leaders organized around the ideal of a vibrant and diverse community. The Montbello Citizens Committee (MCC) saw an opportunity in the 1973 *Keyes vs School District No.1* decision. In this supreme court case, Wilfred Keyes and seven other Black, White, and Latino families sued the Denver Board of Education for maintaining and furthering segregation in education (LeFebvre, 2020). The Denver school district was mandated to prove that it operated without “segregative intent” on a system-wide basis (*Keyes v. School District No.1*). This case became one of the first court cases to identify segregation in northern schools, and Denver—as well as

cities nationwide—were forced to address segregation practices within their schools (*Keyes v. School District No.1*). At the time, this meant bussing, where districts enforced consent decrees by transporting students to schools outside their neighborhoods, in order to meet integration goals. This practice, meant to alleviate segregation, instigated an “out-migration” of whites to the suburbs and “in-migration” of mostly Black and Hispanic families to the cities (Donato, 1997).

This forced reconfiguration of Denver schools provided Montbello leaders an opportunity. They represented Montbello as a robust interracial community and petitioned for their own neighborhood school (which would be, they argued, already integrated). A diverse “city within a city” that included its own high school—without the need to bus students to another community—could position Montbello as appealing to middle class homebuyers and encourage community growth (LeFebre, 2020). In 1976, the *Montbello Bell*, Montbello’s newly created newspaper, noted, “if the proposed Jr.-Sr. High Complex is approved, a new pattern of arrivals and fewer departures from our community could easily increase the number of new homes built to more than 500,” (Thomas, 1976a). In that same year, members of the MCC, including Marjorie Ledell, set their sights on creating a high school in hopes of solidifying Montbello’s growing diversity. The MCC created a coalition and organized community meetings to underscore the need for Montbello to have its own neighborhood high school. In the *Montbello Bell*, several factors were listed as to why creating a new high school was possible, including that it fulfilled the enrollment requirement of having more than 1,200 students and that it would meet the *Keyes* diversity requirements without having students be bussed to another community. Community leaders argued that the school was a way to garner more buy-in to cultivate a diverse neighborhood:



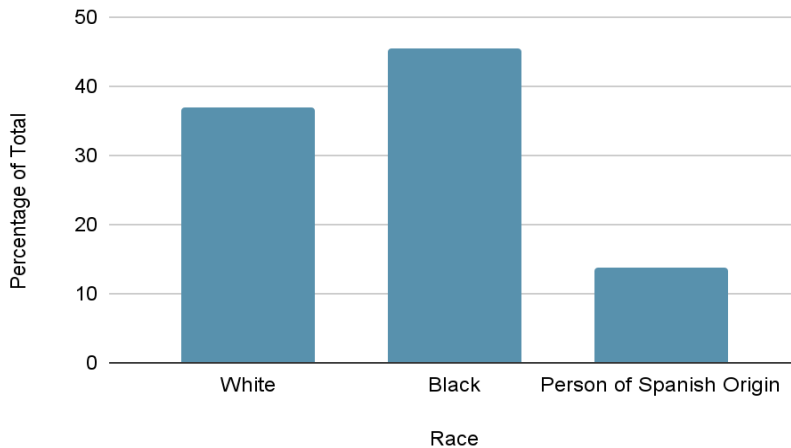
Another factor in our favor is the concerned desire to remain multi-racially balanced. From research studies done in the community, findings indicate that school flight has become plentiful, due to the bussing situation. Primarily Anglos are moving out of the area. A speculative reason for a higher number of Anglos relocating and a lesser number of minorities is economic stability. Whatever the reasons, racial stability is the key in meeting the criteria for a neighborhood school. Not only is racial stability dependent on the building of the Jr. Sr. High Complex, but building of the Complex is dependent on the racial stability of the community to meet the criteria of the Courts (Thomas, 1976b).

The school was positioned as a way to unify the community, and a way to incentivize white residents to remain in the community. Ledell's comments, in an op-ed written in 1980, illuminate these links: "Bussing is a necessary tool to achieve integration, yet the best long-term solution is integrated living [...] Montbello is not pro or anti-bussing; we just feel our multi-racial nature exempts us from bussing, providing we obtain a Jr.-Sr. High" (Montbello School No Busing Ok, 1980).

Given the racial balance in 1980, Montbello was considered an integrated neighborhood and the school board allowed it to forgo bussing in preference of sending students to "naturally integrated" community schools (LeFebre, 2020).

## **Figure 6**

*Montbello Racial Demographics in 1980*



Montbello High School officially opened in the fall of 1980, with the possibility of creating a thriving, diverse and integrated high school. Community leaders achieved their goals in creating the school, but they still faced many obstacles in preserving a diverse Montbello. In an interview with me, Ledell stated that “there was that period of time where it was euphoria,” but then “the forces of real estate” and transitions in the neighborhood impeded their expectations for Montbello High. Ledell explained that the school “did not succeed in sustaining their multiracial, multi economic nature in the neighborhood, like we thought it would,” (M. Ledell, interview, February 5, 2021). Ledell claimed that a diverse Montbello was “just a dream that was aborted by market forces, financial forces, and private industry” (M. Ledell, interview, February 5, 2021).

Although Montbello continued to face an uphill battle to achieve a truly integrated community, the school became a symbol of Montbello unity. From its inception, Montbello High was meant to be a unifying institution for the community, one that allowed Montbello residents to shape a sense of community that reflected their vision and values. A diverse and unified Montbello High School was a thriving Montbello neighborhood. As the *Montbello Bell* stated, Montbello had the potential to be a “one of a kind community. A community with neighborhood

schools for all our children to attend, sharing attitudes and ideas contributed by people of various races and cultures; a multi-racial community, truly a ‘City within a City’” (Thomas, 1976a).

### ***Montbello High: Legacy***

In time, Montbello High School became a beloved cornerstone for the community. Scholars like Ewing (2018) and Siddle-Walker (1996) have shown how schools serve roles beyond academic purposes; they tie communities together by serving as a foundational community institution (Noguera, 2015). In a city magazine, Montbello High School was described as a “social hub for neighbors since opening its doors in 1980” (Siebrase, 2017). Likewise, Mr. Denis, a former teacher leader, newly promoted to assistant principal at DCISM, explained that, “the high school itself was a point of pride for the community. And because it is centrally located and because Montbello doesn't really have a town center like other places have where people can congregate, the high school was the center of the community” (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020). One of the biggest ways that this school connected the community and promoted congregation was through the triumph of its sports programs.

Montbello High brought pride to the community as a sports powerhouse. Ms. Gray, a former DCISM assistant principal, described this legacy: “That's why people knew who they were...It was, ‘Oh Montbello High School. They have a great basketball team. Oh Montbello High School, they're great at track and field.’ This provided another narrative that many could be proud of” (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). Like Ms. Gray demonstrated, Montbello’s sports legacy inspired pride in Montbello. Similarly, a DCISM teacher described:

When you walk down the hallways and, you're down over by the gyms, you see all of those ribbons and trophies. You see how much the sports program meant to that neighborhood and how much those Friday night football games meant and how the kids

had that outlet of having an amazing sports program and a cohesive high school where they felt like that was their home base. And the community recognized that (Davis, interview, April 2, 2020).

This celebration of the success of the Montbello sports program helped to unify the community around a school *and* build community pride in their local athletes. I commonly heard Montbello residents mention sports as this unifying catalyst; indeed, I was struck by how infrequently other aspects of the school were mentioned as part of Montbello's identity.

While Montbello High School was recognized as important to its community, as the standards and accountability movement gained power, it was increasingly evaluated to be a "failing school." Over time—after reviews, academic probation, and other corrective measures—Montbello High was eventually closed, disrupting an essential part of Montbello's identity. Ms. Gray described how the loss of the school and its sports program affected the neighborhood: "That was a part of their community, their sports. When that comprehensive high school went away, *that* went away. Because there wasn't that identity associated in that community," (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). For Ms. Gray, the closure of the school represented a loss of identity for Montbello, as a neighborhood and community.

### ***Montbello's Heart is Torn Out***

In the two decades after Montbello High opened, the landscape of district and state education shifted. In Denver, "policy entrepreneurs," such as now U.S. Senator Michael Bennet, who became Denver superintendent in 2005, brought a commitment to school choice reform, assembled "support from external actors, and advocated for "state policy venue changes," (Marsh et al., 2021, p. 128). This changing policy context ultimately transformed Montbello's schools. The process of Montbello High's closure began in 2008 with a bond that paid for either

a new comprehensive high school in Northeast Denver or for a remodel of the existing Montbello High Campus (Meyer, 2008; Bryant, 2016). After the bond passed, district leaders discussed options for Montbello High, which they connected to concerns with the school's academic performance. The district perceived the school to be in need of intervention because of low academic achievement, dwindling enrollment, and violence and drug problems (Vaccarelli, 2014). The school was highlighted as in need of intervention by state and district accountability frameworks. The Colorado Department of Education deemed Montbello High "did not meet" academic achievement standards for a number of years, and the school was put on various turnaround plans (Colorado Department of Education, 2010). The district proposed a range of turnaround options which ranged from reconstituting the school's staff, replacing school leadership, converting to charter status, or closing the school. Parents did not want to see their school closed and introduced a petition in support of "transformation", the option least disruptive to the school (Bryant, 2016). Ultimately, in 2010, school board members and district leaders chose a "phasing out" process during a school board meeting where "fiery speeches, impassioned pleas and heartfelt statements were aired for hours," (Meyer, 2010). This decision was part of the largest school turnaround plan in district history; the entirety of the plan was situated within Montbello's schools. As a result of this decision, Montbello High could no longer accept new students and graduated its last senior class in 2014. Three new schools, all either innovation or charter schools, were co-located with Montbello High as it completed its phasing out process. Other Montbello schools were also restructured including, two elementary schools reopened under an innovation or charter management organization, one middle school reopened under a charter management organization, and two other elementary schools were re-staffed (Meyer, 2010).

Montbello families and community members vehemently protested this restructuring of their schools, especially the eventual closure of their beloved high school. These protests were documented in a news story on the “emotional” board meeting during which the final decision was made and “Montbello High students held signs that read: ‘Montbello Warriors 30 years too young to die,’” (Meyer, 2010). Students here used death as a metaphor for their school’s closure. Ewing (2018) describes how closures are commonly felt as “violence” in urban communities when districts punish schools for low enrollment and low academic performance—especially since these are factors impacted by long-standing district policies that lead to disinvestment of these schools. In other words, districts punish schools for the very conditions that districts have created, leading to emotional devastation in the community. Brandon Pryor also pointed to the violence caused by DPS: “The district tore it apart intentionally. When they closed Montbello and made it 5 schools, they closed it like it was a cheap Sears. They ripped the heart out of the community” (B. Pryor, interview, August 28, 2020).

Given how central Montbello High School was to community’s sense of identity, it is perhaps not surprising that the closure of the school has cast a long shadow over alumni and neighborhood residents. For example, Garnett’s organization, MOC, recently conducted research on community concerns and found that the loss of the high school still resonated:

Every single person talked about the loss of the high school as being a loss of the heart of the community. That the high school used to be the bridge by which people could transcend their cultural and racial differences. Because everybody was there. I think there's some sort of romanticism about what used to be versus what is. But the perception is that the district really ripped the heart out of the community and caused us to be a

community divided rather than a unifying aspect (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020).

According to Garnett, Montbello High was seen as a unifying institution, a “bridge” to transcend cultural and racial differences, and without it, Montbello was divided. Ms. Thompson described a similar sense of neighborhood fragmentation and disconnection after the closure:

Montbello was the center point of the community. No matter who you are or what ethnicity you was or where you came from, Montbello was your school. We had a sports team to cheer for. We had cheerleading. We had a band. All of that is so broken up now in our area. That's why there's so much disconnect because we have so many different schools....Where's the camaraderie? Where's the support for each other? (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020).

These values, experiences, and symbols of school and community pride that Montbello embodied were not taken into consideration during the district’s deliberation on the value of the school (which relied on an analysis of academic performance). And as Ms. Thompson illustrated, the neighborhood’s camaraderie and support for each other seems to have disappeared without its unifying school. This fragmentation remains salient in the minds of many residents as Montbello schools continue to be debated, reformed, and restructured.

### ***Continued Montbello School Reform***

School choice and marketized reform efforts have played a prominent role in this restructuring. Over the last decade, Denver Public Schools implemented school choice policies through its transformation into a portfolio district, which the district describes, as a “family of high quality, diverse, autonomous public schools, including district-run traditional, district-run innovation, innovative management organizations, innovation zones, and charter schools”

(Portfolio Management Team, n.d.). These portfolio districts have grown nationwide aiming to meet the various needs of their students through a marketplace of options (Daly et.al, 2013; Marsh et al., 2021). As part of a district’s portfolio management system, academically struggling school are closed in order to make space for various new school models (Wright-Costello & Phillippo, 2020). Denver Public Schools engages in both aspects of these practices—closing schools and authorizing new ones—with an aim of ensuring “equity in school choice and accountability” and improving school performance (Portfolio Management Team, n.d.). Here, for example, Denver Public Schools passed a school closure policy in December 2015 which called for closing schools that met a strict set of criteria, including years of lagging academic growth (Asmar, 2017a). The large school restructuring initiative in Montbello was part of these policy shifts. Indeed, district leaders have cited higher test scores and rising graduation rates as evidence that the new innovation schools located on Montbello’s former high school campus, are meeting the policy’s objectives (Widman et. al. 2018).

However, to many Montbello residents, these policies do not address other valued aspects of schools: as unifying neighborhood spaces, as community symbols. Garnett explained:

There's a lot of resentment and frustration that the campus is now comprised of four schools. I've been talking to students for the last three and a half to four years who express how they feel like they're in silos. That there literally have been big gates, walls put up to prevent them from interacting with each other. So, a feeling of loss of identity. And that really spreads out into the whole community (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020).

According to Garnett, these small schools create divisions that prohibit communal sharing and lead to a loss of community identity. Pryor also expressed his concerns that school choice and



co-located schools fragment the community. He ties such policies to an increase in youth violence in Montbello:

(Co-location) creates almost like different cliques and gangs that wouldn't have existed. I think that's a lot of what you're seeing out here with the youth violence is because of the school reform. A lot of these kids are supposed to be friends, but instead they are like rivals. And then they take that rivalry to the next level, and sometimes it turns violent. And then when it does that, then you have retaliations and the back and forth. School reform, believe it or not, is responsible for a lot of that. We didn't have a lot of these issues when Montbello was one school (B. Pryor, interview, August 28, 2020).

While community activists and long-term residents were often critical of the small schools that replaced Montbello High School, other—newer—residents felt differently. In particular, many Latino parents I encountered in my research liked the new schools. Parents were especially supportive of DCISM, since they felt comfortable approaching the school and believed the school met the needs of their children. For example, Ms. Gutierrez, a Mexican mother who immigrated to the U.S. in the last 5 years, assured me that she felt *acogida*, or welcomed, by the school. She explained:

Cada vez que voy, pues para empezar, me tratan bien las secretarias. Ya con eso ya es mucho (risa). Ya si uno necesita hablar con el director o los maestros, pues también tenemos una pronta respuesta. Y pues también buscan el modo que sea en nuestro idioma [Every time I go, well first of all, the secretaries treat me well. That is already a lot (laughs). Then if you need to talk to the principal or teachers, well we have a prompt response. And well, they also make the effort to communicate in our language]” (Gutierrez, interview, September 8, 2020).

The school's treatment of parents, as well as the effort to communicate in their language, made a positive impression on these Latino parents. In later chapters, I expand on this point, detailing how DCISM has succeeded in becoming a beloved school for the Montbello Latino community. In both cases, however, school choice reform has fragmented the Montbello community. Moreover, the different perspectives between Latino and Black residents about these new small schools suggest that racialized divisions may exacerbate fragmentation within Montbello. Next, I turn to these racialized divisions, describing how they shape how schools function within the neighborhood.

### **School Debates and Racialized Divisions**

Here, the dynamics between the neighborhood and its schools intersect with—and reinforce—some of the racialized divisions I highlighted at the beginning of the chapter. Demographic shifts and the *Black/Brown Divide* have deeply impacted interactions in schools. Ms. Danvers, an administrator at DCISM, links racial divisions with gentrification pressures, and links both to challenges faced by schools, as they face students with very different needs:

Those racial divisions have also happened at the same time [as gentrification]...The demographic shift in the FNE<sup>9</sup> is fairly significant. When I was there 10 years ago, when we were talking about having schools that were focused on African American students and the gap—which still, statistically, the African American performance and achievement for African American males and African American students is still below that of the rest of the district. So the opportunity gap still exists. There's still a disproportionate representation in the district of discipline and placement in special education and all of those things that absolutely need to be addressed. And those exist at

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<sup>9</sup> Far Northeast, the Denver region where Montbello is located.

the same time as significant growth in the Latinx population in the FNE, in particular, a highly immigrant Latinx population. So we're talking about very different needs (Danvers, interview April 16, 2020).

Ms. Danvers describes how some educational needs have shifted—especially with more Latinx students enrolling in neighborhood schools—while also pointing to the persistent need to address “gaps” for African American students. These perceived changes and different kinds of school interventions can contribute to racialized divisions. Ms. Danvers’ comments highlight how schools use their limited resources in schools to meet the most urgent needs of their students. However, limited school resources—especially in a divided community facing consequences from gentrification pressures—may encourage competition between residents for attention and resources in schools. For example, some African American parents feel left behind by the growing attention that Latino students receive for their language needs. Ms. Thompson explained that when the Latino shift occurred, “I kind of did feel like schools—because so many of the Latinos that were coming, they don't speak English—So I feel like a lot of schools started having to cater to the English as a Second Language situation (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020). This “catering” to Latino families potentially alienated Black families in schools and ignored their needs.

Although Black residents may feel cast aside in schools, Black voices have a strong presence in organizing around education issues in Montbello. In part because of its identity as a historically African American neighborhood, the media often highlights Black voices, especially in its coverage of community resistance to district reforms. Melanie Asmar, a Denver-based reporter for Chalkbeat, recognized some of these disparities, noting that she tends to consult Black leaders, even when she is writing stories about a largely Latino community:

When I think about the community leaders that I tend to talk to in Montbello, I feel like I probably talk to more Black leaders in Montbello than Latino leaders, but you're totally right. It is, you know, if you look at the demographics of the schools, I think most of them are majority Latino. (M. Asmar, interview, August 10, 2020).

Her stories on education reflect this practice. Asmar widely cites African American leaders like Brandon Pryor, Jennifer Bacon, an African American representative for the School Board, and Hasira Ashemu, an African American community activist in the larger Denver area (Asmar, 2018b; Asmar, 2019a; Asmar, 2019b). These individuals have influence in the community and a long history of advocating for Montbello and their schools, and they have also had success in creating their own schools or impacting education in Denver. Highlighting these voices in the media reflects the power that some Black leaders have in influencing discussions about education in Montbello. Some of this, as Asmar explained, reflects their leadership in long-standing community organizations: “there are some established organizations that work out there that have Black leaders because they've historically done work in those neighborhoods like community organizations or advocacy organizations that are tied to that neighborhood” (M. Asmar, interview, August 10, 2020).

These organizations and influential leaders continue to shape Montbello schools, even though the Latino community is now the majority in Montbello. The Latino community struggles to influence education issues in Montbello. Contributing to this struggle is the marginalization of the Latino voice through district attempts to engage Montbello residents. For example, in a district survey regarding the construction of a new school in Montbello, Latino residents were not properly represented. In the following interaction during a community presentation of this

research, the superintendent asked how the Latino community engaged in the survey process.

The researcher's response demonstrated the lack of representation:

Researcher: So, I'll be really honest. I think we would've hoped for more survey responses. We had around 74 responses, only 1 was in Spanish. The demographics, it was around 20 percent Latino, around 20% Black or African American and I believe around 30% white individuals. 6% were Native American/Indian, and 13% were more than one race. Yes, and we will include that in our final report.

Cordova: So certainly not yet representative of the demographics of the community. So that's something that we want to make sure that we're consciously striving for, is getting more demographics that reflect the diversity of the community engaged in this process.

(fieldnotes, February 4, 2020).

Cordova pointed to the fact that the study was not representative of the community and that they were "consciously striving for" more representation. The fact that only one survey was completed in Spanish, when many Latino immigrants in the neighborhood prefer to use Spanish, is a glaring instance of the absence of the Latino immigrant community from district engagement efforts. Here, the superintendent stressed the need to address this omission, but as I describe in Chapter 5, language and culture barriers, as well as different concepts of engagement, are obstacles to accomplishing this goal.

These dynamics point to a racialized struggle over schools, one that is directly linked to the *Black/Brown Divide*. Jennifer Bacon asked for healing that divide in Montbello schools:

I hope that coming together to talk about the leadership we need in our school will bring opportunities to bring the community together. I'm from South Florida, where Black people speak Spanish. I had never heard the term Black/Brown Divide. No way that

we're going to build a comprehensive anything if we don't build community and relationships. It starts with meeting people where they're at, including their language and their homes. If not, we will miss the bigger opportunity. Maybe we didn't have these conversations 10 years ago, but we need to have them now (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020).

Bacon alludes to changing demographics in Montbello and the urgency to address the divisions. However, naming these divisions as a *Black/Brown Divide* also masks some of the complexity behind interactions and relationships in Montbello. I argue that defining this division solely as a racial phenomenon hides community complexity, and possibly obfuscates the potential for schools to heal these divisions.

Several aspects of difference are obscured by the “Black/Brown divide.” First, focusing on divisions between these two racial groups hides divisions present *within* racial categories. For example, the Latina immigrant mothers in Madres de DCIS, our PAR group, do not identify themselves as Brown and are uncomfortable with that term. During a research meeting, Jaqui expressed her frustration with that term, where she explained that there was no room for conversations about differences in language, culture, or immigration status. She said, “Solo hay gente negra y “Brown people”, ya nos pusieron etiqueta [There are only Black and Brown people, they already labeled us]”. Ms. Marta, a staff member, shared that she wasn't Brown; she was Hispana and that there were differences between Latinos and Chicanos and other groups. Jaqui responded, “Yo prefiero Latina, pero no nos pueden preguntar. Nos categorizan por igual sin saber, eso me incomoda [I prefer Latina, but they can't ask us. They categorize us as all the same without knowing, and that makes me uncomfortable]” (fieldnotes, December 5, 2020).

By placing all Latinos under one category, cultural and language diversity is hidden. For example, Denver has a historic Chicano community with strong activist roots and different schooling experiences than the mostly immigrant, Latino community in Montbello (Donato, 1997). Furthermore, nationality and cultural differences influence the ways that Latinos build community in Montbello. For example, Juana, a Central American mother in the research group, spoke of how the Mexican identity pervades the native Denverite understanding of the Latino identity in Montbello, the largest group of Latino immigrants in Montbello:

Yo te cuento que a mí una de las primeras cosas que me molestó mucho cuando vine aquí a Denver es cuando escuché—y no fue una vez, fueron unas cinco o seis veces que me dijeron Americanos: ‘Ah, tú hablas Mexicano.’ ‘No, yo no hablo Mexicano, yo hablo Español.’ Yo trabajo con la cultura de El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, México. Es totalmente diferente. Y entonces hasta dentro de nosotros mismos como hispanos, nos cuesta adaptarnos y acoplarnos porque aunque somos hispanos hay sentimientos, hay cosas que son diferentes. [I tell you that one of the first things I heard that bothered me a lot when I came here to Denver is when I heard--and it wasn't one time, it was five or six times that Americans would tell me: ‘Oh, you speak Mexican.’ ‘No, I don't speak Mexican, I speak Spanish.’ I work with the culture from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico. It's completely different. And so, even within ourselves as Hispanics, it's difficult to adapt and adjust to each other because although we are Hispanic, there are feelings, things that are different]” (J., interview, April 23, 2020).

Juana noted how this primarily Mexican understanding of being Latino affected how she is perceived and how she interacts with other Latinos. Likewise, Lorena, another Central American mother in the group, expressed how being around others from Central America made her feel a

stronger sense of belonging since, “Hay algo de ti que tú puedas compartir con esas personas y eso también creo que impactó en mi vida, sentí un pedacito algo de mi cultura.[There’s something about you that you can share with those people and that is something that has impacted my life, I felt a small part of my culture]” (L., interview, April 14, 2020). Lorena expressed how sharing in Central American culture, different from Mexican culture, can create a feeling of closeness to other Central American immigrants. These experiences highlight the diversity among Latinos in Montbello, as well as in the U.S. more broadly. The tendency to amalgamate Latinos into one group has been highlighted nationally, as political scholars and pundits point to the “Latino vote” as a false concept that hides very strong political and historical differences among Latinos (Escobar, 2020). Similarly, in Montbello, positioning all Latinos as “Brown” and with the same needs, masks nuanced divisions present in the community.

The *Black/Brown Divide*, as a term, highlights race as the primary factor in Montbello divisions, rather than recognizing language and cultural practices. Other Montbello stakeholders, like Ms. Gray, reflect some hesitancy to pinpoint race as the cause of divisions. She explained, “So a lot of those parents, they don't speak Spanish. I don't think it is about race as much as it is the language piece” (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). Ms. Gray provided an example of how language differences contributed to divisions:

A parent comes in the office and they hear both secretaries and the parents speaking Spanish and they don't know what's being said. They don't feel like they are a part. So I think it's more of the language piece, not race. Because if they speak the same language, I think that that's more of that sense of belonging (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020).

Here, Ms. Gray points to the power of language in building belonging while simultaneously marginalizing others. For Ms. Gray, it is possible that African American residents, who already



feel their community changing, may hear school faculty use Spanish openly and consistently, potentially making them feel alienated in their school as well.

Cultural differences can foment divisions as well. Jaqui, a Mexican mother, describes how cultural differences can cause misunderstandings:

Muchas ocasiones me ha tocado escuchar, como decir: ‘Ay, en las casas, viven mucha gente, tienen muchos carros. Se estacionan en frente de mi hogar y me molesta.’ En lugar de entender que somos una comunidad muy familiar. Vivimos con tíos, primos, o hermanos. Abuela vive en casa. Los chicos que usualmente se van a las universidades aún están en casa. Van a la universidad, pero regresan a casa. [On various occasions, I have heard: ‘Oh, in their houses, there are too many people, they have too many cars. They park in front of my home and it bothers me.’ Instead of understanding that we are a family-centered people. We live with uncles, cousins, or brothers. Grandmother lives at home. The kids that usually go off to college are still at home. They go to college, but they come back home] (J., interview, April 14, 2020).

These language and cultural differences can contribute to barriers in communication. Jaqui explained that divisions between Black and Latino residents exist because of a communication barrier: “Creo que hay una disparidad de conversación. No estamos alineados culturalmente, pero siento que es solamente por falta de comunicación. [I think there is a disparity in conversation. We aren’t aligned culturally, but I think it’s only because of a lack of communication]” (J., interview, April 14, 2020).

Confusing these language and cultural differences with racial divisions is common. Scholars have pointed to how language and culture are *racialized*, where language standardization is linked to normative whiteness, and anything other than English is marginalized

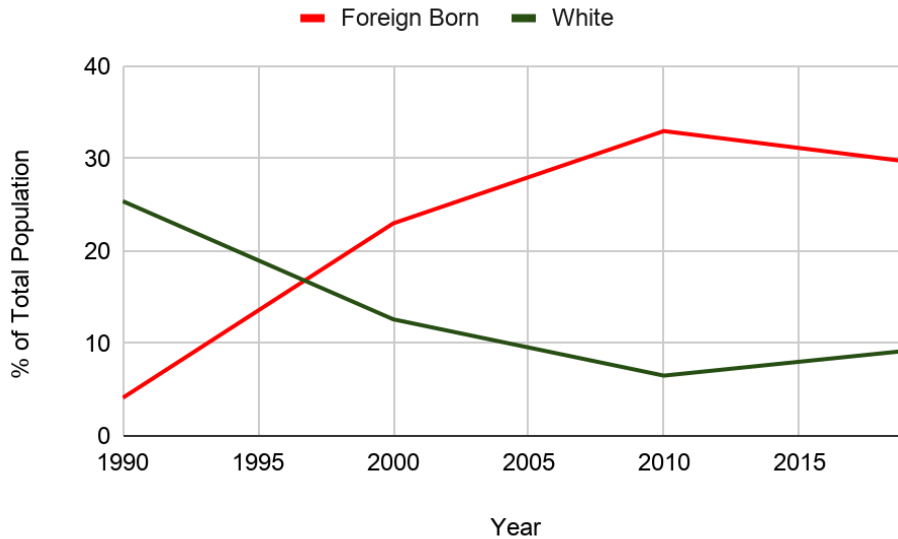
in the U.S. (Rosa, 2016). Rosa and Flores (2017) understand the construction of who is American through race and language as “within the historical production of nation-state/colonial governmentality, and the ways that colonial distinctions within and between nation-state borders continue to shape contemporary linguistic and racial formations” (p. 62). Therefore, individuals understand themselves within these hierarchies that position Europeanness as superior. With this analysis in mind, I argue that these divisions in Montbello are better described as *racialized* divisions that obscure language and culture differences. These racialized divisions place pressure on the ways that Montbello residents interact with each other, especially in schools. Furthermore, school leaders and community members pressure schools to solve these community divisions—perhaps a steep expectation for schools. Although Montbello residents remember Montbello High fondly, as Ledell described, it never fully achieved the unification of a diverse Montbello. However, schools continue to be positioned as solutions for racialized divisions. If schools will be spaces of healing and belonging, understanding the root causes of these divisions is key.

### **Who Is Montbello? Reimagining Montbello’s Identity**

As factors like gentrification continue to place pressure on affordable housing and schools continue to be restructured, Montbello also continues to evolve. In the last few years, the growth of the foreign born and Latinx population has slowed; simultaneously, the white population seems to be growing slowly. For example, the share of foreign-born residents slightly dropped from 33% in 2010 to 29.7% in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In contrast, the white population grew from 6.5% in 2010 to 9.2% in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, 2019). This potential trend may disrupt the ideal for diversity that many Montbello residents seem to hold. Throughout my research, I never heard Montbello residents celebrate the arrival of more white residents to achieve more diversity; indeed, their idea of diversity seemed to decenter whiteness.

**Figure 7**

*Change in % of Total Population of Foreign Born and White Residents Over Time*



Furthermore, changes in Montbello schools threaten to dramatically change the educational system in Montbello yet again. Since the closure of Montbello High, community leaders have called for a return of a comprehensive high school to the neighborhood (Asmar, 2018a). For example, according to a 2018 news story, Bacon, the school board member, was “working to form a committee of parents, students, teachers, and other residents to come up with a vision for what public education should look like in the far northeast—and, perhaps, a model for future new schools in the region” (Asmar, 2018a). Although there was pushback from teachers and administrators who were wary of possible closures to make room for the comprehensive high school, this conversation gained new energy with the election of new Denver School Board members in November of 2019 (Asmar, 2018a). This election marked the first time in a decade where the majority of the board was not backed by education reformers supporting school choice policies (Connor, 2019). After this election, Mr. Silva told me there were rumors this new board could push for a comprehensive high school, putting his job and the

existence of DCISM in jeopardy. Indeed, after the election, he received a call from a district official that assured him that this would not happen (fieldnotes, November 8, 2019).

However, the call for the return of a comprehensive high school intensified during 2019 and 2020. In 2019, the district announced a bond initiative to either renovate or rebuild the Montbello campus. The district also committed to include community members in the design of any remodeled or renovated building (Asmar, 2019c). District leaders held community discussions, in an initiative they termed, “Reimagining Montbello.” They invited residents, parents, teachers, and community members to voice their opinions in the first phase of the decision-making process, which focused on needed improvements to the school facility. Throughout the process, school district officials avoided encouraging the return of a comprehensive school. For example, Dustin Kress, an operations program manager for the district said, “This is not relaunching the comprehensive high school. This is planning for a new facility for the programs currently on the Montbello campus” (Asmar, 2019c). Regardless of these statements, district research also documented many neighborhood residents’ calls to return to a comprehensive school (Fieldnotes February 4, 2020). In June of 2020, the district officially announced they had “heard” the community and were pledging to return to a comprehensive high school (Asmar, 2020). As a part of this process, three small schools—two of them located on the Montbello campus, including DCISM—would close.

The new comprehensive high school has been touted as a way to unify Montbello and recapture the sense of community lost when the former high school was closed. For example, the job description for the new school leader described an ideal candidate who must lead the “development of a unifying school culture” which “begins by getting to know the community, the current three schools in place, and designing an inclusive process to honor what all

stakeholders bring to the new school,” (DPS Job Listings, 2020). This description prioritizes the leader’s work to rebuild community and create a “unifying culture.” In some sense, it asks the school leader to bring back a former sense of Montbello as one community.

This new school may seem like an appropriate solution in forming a unified identity for Montbello. But several Latino parents have pointed to the lack of representation of the Latino community, and especially Latino parents, in district decision-making. For example, Jaqui, a Mexican mother and community organizer, expressed disillusion in the district’s promise of inclusion in the decision-making around the new school:

Yo me he apartado mucho porque, pues, a pesar de que quiero estar en las reuniones, nunca he sido escogida. Ellos tienen otras personas que ni siquiera están relativas a la escuela, y hay madres de familia que queremos estar ahí. No deberían de nomás tener grupos limitados, eso me parece también muy absurdo. [I have distanced myself from [the process] because, well, despite that I want to be in the meetings, I have never been selected. They have other people that aren’t even linked to the school, and there are mothers that want to be there. They shouldn’t have only limited groups, that seems to me very absurd, too.] (J., interview, February 23, 2021).

Jaqui feels pushed away by the very district practices that aim to include community members in decision-making. She points to the district’s “limited groups” that often exclude those who want to participate, and often have the most at stake (parents of school-aged children). Consequently, these limited groups end up making decisions for the whole community that may not represent the views of Latino parents. Mr. Denis, a DCISM administrator, is also skeptical as to who these groups working with the district are speaking for: “It’s really difficult to say because you have very vocal community members. And then one has to ask, well, how much of the community do

they speak for?” (Denis, interview, 2020). He continued to explain how certain prominent, and louder, voices may obscure alternate and competing visions for education in Montbello:

I think that if you ask parents at DCIS Montbello, for example, they may not want that. They might feel like they know the people. It's small enough for them to handle. The kids are not getting lost in a large system. And then there are other pockets of the community, more often the Black pockets of the community that really do want Montbello to return because of its historic meaning. So, personally, I don't know what is, what is best for the community (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).

Like Mr. Denis points out, this decision may leave out many Latino parents who are satisfied with their small schools and do not want to see the closure of their beloved school. As I describe in Chapter 6, DCISM has worked to build spaces of belonging for these Latino immigrant families. However, these more recent residents may not be aware of the historical context of Montbello's schools, and can be puzzled as to why Black residents—even those who do not have children in the school—are influencing district decisions. In a DCISM School Advisory Board meeting where the rebuild vs. renovate decision was discussed, a Mexican father lamented:

No entiendo. Nosotros deberíamos de ser los primeros en estar enterados, los padres de las tres escuelas deberían de estar enterados. Esto suena muy arbitrario, porque la gente que no tiene hijos en la escuela están buscando estos cambios. A mi me parece un sistema excelente. Hay una palabra que usamos en México que se usa para describir esto. Es mucha “chirinola”. Es la gente que le gusta andar haciendo relajó. [I don't understand. We should be the first to know about this, the parents of the 3 schools should know about this. This sounds too arbitrary, why the people who don't have kids here in the school are looking for these changes. It seems to me to be an excellent school system. There is a

word that we use in Mexico that we use to describe this. It's a bunch of "chirinola". It's the people who like making a mess of things]. (fieldnotes, February 10, 2020)

This father expresses frustration that his voice, as a father, is not heard, while others who do not have children in Montbello schools—those he perceives to not have such an important stake in the conversation—attempt to change the existing education system. These clashing viewpoints reveal some of the racialized divisions that shape conversations about Montbello schools. This constant flux in the community, including the recent departure of Latina superintendent Susana Cordova in December 2020, creates instability and complicates the formation of a unified identity and shared sense of community. Ultimately, I argue that Montbello's struggle over its schools reflects a contentious struggle for belonging in the larger Montbello neighborhood. Next, I turn to how distrust stemming from community fragmentation has impacted community and school relationships and the efforts to rebuild a unified community.

## Chapter IV: Layers of Distrust

As described in the last chapter, Montbello is a fragmented community. The neighborhood's schools have both contributed to—and attempted to heal—community divisions. This chapter explores how this fragmentation contributes to a pervasive sense of *distrust* among Montbello stakeholders. Distrust, as I develop in this chapter, is multifaceted, and characterizes relationships between stakeholders, and between community residents and institutions, including the school district and local schools. Indeed, when I asked Brandon Pryor, a community leader and organizer, about how the school district could address distrust, he responded thoughtfully and ultimately claimed that this was “a layered onion, all these issues...” (B. Pryor, interview, August 28, 2020).

To conceptualize my findings, I draw on Schultz's (2019) framework of distrust. As noted in Chapter 1, she outlines three different types of distrust: relational, structural and contextual. She argues that many communities are quick to blame *individuals* for educational reform, framing changes through a lens of *relational* trust. However, this move, as Schultz explains, obscures the structural and contextual factors that shape conditions of distrust. I draw on her analysis to analyze the multiple forms and layers of distrust present in everyday interactions between the district, school leaders, parents, students, and other community members. Distrust is a growing area of study in education research, particularly in contexts undergoing significant school and neighborhood change (Schultz, 2019). Similarly, scholars have acknowledged the importance of studying the interconnections between schools and neighborhoods. For instance, Hong (2011) argues that educators need “an approach that acknowledges the complex, inseparable interaction of schools and communities--an ecological approach,” to transform schools (p. 24). Drawing on this framework, I document how



community fragmentation and distrust work in conjunction to weaken the development of a unified Montbello vision for their neighborhood schools, and consequently, for their community. Using Brandon Pryor's metaphor, I describe distrust in terms of layers. I first document contextual distrust: the more far-reaching factors that have caused fragmentation. I turn, in subsequent sections, to layers of structural and relational distrust, before exploring efforts to rebuild trust in Montbello.

### **Contextual Distrust: a Fragmented Montbello**

One layer of distrust impacting Montbello's schools is situated in the sociocultural, historical, and political contexts of schools and communities. Schultz (2019) refers to this as *contextual distrust*, which manifests in "local interactions that have persisted over time, often between members of various ethnic and racial groups, and is also inflected by power" (p. 4). In the case of Montbello, an increasingly immigrant community, this also includes aspects of transnational experiences. I argue that in an immigrant community, such aspects of distrust can be shaped by transnational experiences of distrust that have stemmed from marginalization by government and local policies and laws, as well as instability and lack of knowledge of how to navigate their new home and schools.

In Montbello, such aspects of contextual distrust have been shaped by a larger movement of market-based policies and accountability measures that position schools as vehicles of academic achievement. As described in previous chapters, school choice policies and the growth of portfolio districts are meant to provide more equitable opportunities in education, but also work to marginalize and fragment communities of color (Ewing, 2018; Daly et.al., 2013; Noguera, 2015). Montbello residents still feel the effects of the school choice policies that have dramatically restructured the education system in their neighborhood and often question if these

changes were meant to provide more equitable solutions for Montbello's students of color. As Brandon Pryor noted, "Black and Brown communities have been ignored as a whole and targeted for these Frankenstein experiments, like co-location" (Asmar, 2018a). For him, school choice policies were "experiments" that targeted Montbello students, rather than prioritizing successful practices for equity. Jennifer Bacon, the School Board representative for Montbello, used similar language in a social media post, noting that the neighborhood "will no longer be the site of DPS experimentation. Rather, it will be ground zero for the future of our entire district. A future of co-leadership, partnership, and community" (Bacon, 2018).

These local leaders highlight the disjuncture between community values and district policies. Such disjunctures have also been documented by researchers; a recently published study about the portfolio system in Denver found that community members questioned the "underlying values of a system run by leaders who they believed did not represent the true interests of the diverse community" (Marsh et al., 2021, p. 146). This disconnect has also surfaced in recent community and district conversations, where Montbello stakeholders continue to question the policies that shape their schools. In a 2020 "Reimagining Montbello" meeting where district leaders and community members were discussing the potential remodel or rebuild of the Montbello campus, Ms. Atchison, a principal of one of the campus' co-located schools argued that the district needed to directly acknowledge how its policies shaped community interactions. To the sound of snaps of approval from the audience, she said, "If we don't deal with the root of what's going on, then having a remodel of the building is not going to make an obvious difference." Then she shared a quotation from Ibram X. Kendi, reading, "Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy. It's a pretty easy mistake to

make. People are in our faces, policies are distant. We are particularly poor at seeing the policies lurking behind the struggle of people.” She then looked up and continued to speak:

If we don’t address the policies that create the inequities that we are seeing, we’re gonna have the same things happen over and over and over again. And I believe we have to stand up and stop with the symbolic gestures and get to the root of the problem. And if we never do that, we’re going to be in the same place no matter what the building looks like (fieldnotes, February 4, 2020).

As this administrator points out, the district failed to recognize school choice *policies* as factors that continue to shape community dynamics and distrust. In this sense, Ms. Atchison argued that a new, combined school—however well-meaning—could not, on its own, address deeper aspects of inequality. In this sense, she echoes Schultz’s analysis. Here, the district focused on an event—the closure of the original Montbello high school—without recognizing how this event was situated within larger contexts of market-oriented school reforms, ones that have eroded trust between the community and the school district.

As I noted in the previous chapter, gentrification is another potential factor that has contributed to distrust in Montbello. Gentrification causes residents to be wary of “outside” investors, fearing that rising housing prices that may displace and transform their community.

Ms. Danvers, a DCISM administrator, describes some of these gentrification pressures:

You also see the significant gentrification that’s happening in the FNE (Far Northeast) as well. As homes have expanded, as Stapleton has built out, you are starting to see the development with the airport. Also, some of that distrust comes with gentrification, you know, what are the other things happening to the community. And again, more of that sense of being done to, than being done with (Danvers, interview, April 16, 2020).

Ms. Danvers illustrates that gentrification contributes to distrust in the neighborhood, especially because of how these urban restructuring decisions are being made. The process of decision-making does not include community members and leads to the sense of “being done to.” By excluding community members from decisions that impact their community, residents may feel a loss of control over their neighborhood, who wish it to remain a community created by residents and for residents. For example, a local news story cited a Montbello pastor who shared, “We want to hang on to this community. We don't want it to be enhanced and turned over to somebody else. If you want to build alongside current and long-term residents, we're an open and welcoming community—but we don't want our residents to be displaced” (Siebrase, 2017).

While not mentioned directly, this local religious leader highlights tensions between older and newer Montbello residents, but also dynamics of race and class. As I detailed in Chapter 1, scholars have pointed to how the battle for community spaces is linked to the racialization of space (Harris, 1993; Mills, 1997; Lipsitz, 2007). Furthermore, Lipsitz (2007) argues that threatened communities cling to “fashioning ferocious attachments to place as a means of producing useful mechanisms of solidarity” (p. 11). This community ideal allows marginalized communities to “increase the *use* value of their neighborhoods by turning segregation into congregation,” which Lipsitz (2007) argues is a valuable asset for Black communities in creating powerful networks and communities that serve them (p. 11). And as described in the last chapter, schools can play essential roles in fashioning those powerful networks and solidarity. However, in the case of Montbello, contested school changes lead residents to question whether schools are fulfilling that purpose.

As gentrification pressures loom over the neighborhood, the district announced their plan to return to a comprehensive high school for the neighborhood. The district has positioned this

decision as an effort to repair the harms inflicted through the Montbello High closure, yet community members have voiced their suspicions (Asmar, 2020). One interaction during a Reimagining Montbello meeting highlights community members' skepticism around plans for the school in the context of gentrification. In this meeting, Jennifer Bacon mentioned that the district needed to consider potential growth they planned the new school:

We know that we are experiencing a lot of growth here too. I think we should all talk about that. Anybody who lives here, you can see all of the new apartment buildings west of Peña and all of the new neighborhoods being built all the way up to the airport east of Peña. So we have the chance to really think about what are the school opportunities as well as athletic opportunities that we can possibly re-shift in the next couple of years.

Because we are going to see more students come into our neighborhoods that will provide us the opportunities to make some of those shifts (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020).

Here, Bacon focuses on the potential benefits for schools from new growth in the area, but this growth may also bring in new residents, changing the composition of the neighborhood and possible constituent pressures on the school district. Scholars have documented how school districts have used school choice policies to “invest” in growth. For instance, Quarles and Butler (2018) argue that school choice and gentrification are intertwined:

Neoliberal educational policies that market public schools as neighborhood or that replace neighborhood schools with expanded choice options may be especially pronounced in gentrifying contexts as government officials, private developers, and school- and district-level education leaders seek to capitalize on the investments of newly arriving middle- and upper-class families to improve public schools (p. 453).

Therefore, school districts may view growth as an opportunity for the schools they manage, ignoring the consequences for those students already living in those neighborhoods. Similarly, Lipman (2013) argues that neoliberal education policy exacerbates gentrification effects as it is “driven by, and helps shape, gentrification and the regulation and displacement of low-income communities of color,” especially when education is positioned as “integral to housing markets and cultural representations of the city, which are used to market it to mobile capital and labor” (p.44). With this context, Bacon’s outline of “benefits” takes on a potential new light, underscoring the risks as well as the benefits of growth.

Somewhat surprisingly, Bacon made these comments after an exchange that pointed to gentrification and school choice as a dangerous combination for Montbello, and one that left residents wary of the district’s intentions. Not long before, a Montbello teacher voiced concerns around the district’s handling of school closures and the effects of gentrification in another Denver neighborhood: “I saw this happen when gentrification started taking over in Five Points. And now we have gentrification happening out here in Montbello. And now it’s: ‘Close everything down, restart.’ (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020). This teacher’s comment suggests a potential connection between gentrification and school choice. Quickly responding to the teacher’s comment, using the chat function<sup>10</sup>, one resident posed a question to district officials:

I agree with [the teacher], our community is going through many changes that are pushing out our black and brown people. So, are you truly creating this school for our people or the new people moving in? (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020).

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<sup>10</sup> This meeting was held on-line because of the pandemic.

Although this question was not answered in the meeting, district leaders collected the questions in the chat and answered them publicly by publishing them on the Reimagining Montbello webpage. Their answer to this question follows:

In response to years of community advocacy and feedback from the Montbello community and the advocacy raised in the Reimagining Montbello process, the Superintendent along with Board members committed to unifying the existing school communities of DCIS-Montbello, Noel Community Arts School and Collegiate Preparatory Academy and reimagine them as a large comprehensive Montbello High School as well as a feeder middle school in school year 2022-2023. The new schools will be designed for the current student population at NCAS, DCIS-M, and CPA and for students attending feeder elementary and K-8 schools in Montbello. (Denver Public Schools, 2020)

Although this answer provides information about the students who will be *enrolling* at the new school, the response fails to address the suspicion and doubt at the heart of the question. District leaders did not address gentrification, displacement and the interests that might be served by a new neighborhood high school. Here, I suggest that the district's failure to recognize threats and fears around gentrification can contribute to contextual distrust, as many community members and parents point to gentrification as the district's motivator for the creation of this new school. With these features in mind, in the next section, I turn to structural distrust, showing how the district's bureaucratic structures and policies have contributed to distrust in the community.

### **Structural Distrust: the Role of the School District**

Schultz (2019) explains structural distrust as connected to local politics and embedded in hierarchies and bureaucratic structures or policies that undermine participation by local

communities. According to Schultz, structural distrust can occur through top-down decision-making that is *for* communities, rather than done *with* communities. In Montbello, the school district's reliance on centralized decision-making and sweeping reforms may have fomented structural distrust. School and community stakeholders highlighted various ways in which hierarchical decisions had shaped distrust in the district and its educational policies.

One practice related to how school leaders were selected, and how often they were replaced. Ms. Gray, a former DCISM assistant principal, recalled the district's practice of transitioning principals frequently in the former Montbello High School, which left community members wary of the district: "They had seemingly this endless train of principals that were coming through there. As soon as someone would create some stability, [the district] would take them out or they would leave (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). Ms. Gray pointed to top-heavy decision-making as one of the factors that led to instability in the school. Furthermore, Ms. Gray blamed the district for appointing school leaders that did not care about Montbello, and "weren't invested in it, which led to the school closing down," (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). Here, Ms. Gray suggests that district-level policies and practices worked to undermine Montbello High as a stable and functioning school, contributing to rationales for the school's eventual closure.

The high leadership turnover in the former Montbello High School was characteristic of the district's approach to school leadership. According to a Chalkbeat analysis in 2014, "although Denver's overall principal turnover rate has fallen by almost half, turnover has not slowed at nearly a quarter of Denver schools, where three or more principals have come and gone since 2008" (Schimel, 2014). This problem is larger in the Far Northeast, where Montbello is located, where "seven of the eight schools targeted for intense improvement and given additional support are among those with high turnover" (Schimel, 2014). According to this



analysis, district officials in Denver, like other districts in the country, replace principals after a year or two if they have not achieved high rates of academic achievement. However, such turnover—even when motivated by a focus on student outcomes—contributes to instability, and ultimately prevents growth and improvement (Schimel, 2014). High principal turnover remains an issue today, including at DCISM. Since the school was founded in 2014, there have been four principals in seven years. Most stayed for a few years, with the longest term being three years (Schimel, 2014). The current principal, Mr. Silva started in the Fall of 2018, and is currently in his third year. While complex, this high turnover can be perceived—as Ms. Gray suggests—as another sign of district disinvestment in the community’s schools.

Montbello residents have also highlighted the district’s hierarchical decision-making process in Montbello High’s closure. Residents pointed to an unbalance of power that undermined community participation in conversations around their neighborhood schools. For example, Donna Garnett, a community leader, explained that there, “has been a lot of lost trust, anger, and resentment over the shutdown of the school” and that the decision was largely due to an “administration and school board that felt like they knew better and that they would make the decisions regardless of what the community wanted” (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020). Garnett suggests how this decision—both how it came about, and the eventual result—contributed to the community’s distrust and resentment towards the district. Likewise, Ms. Thompson, an African American mother and DCISM staff member, described how the Montbello High closure, as well as other district interventions, led to distrust:

I think a lot of people, first of all they don't trust them (district officials). Because of everything that happened with Montbello and a lot of people felt blindsided, and they felt

like it was just totally done backhanded when the whole closure of Montbello happened (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020).

Ms. Thompson cites a feeling of being “blindsided” when community members were marginalized from the decision-making process about the former Montbello High School. Here, as Schultz (2019) argues, hierarchical decision making that ignores the dreams or demands of the less powerful in the education system contributes to structural distrust. Ms. Danvers, a DCISM administrator, clarified this decision-making around the closure of Montbello High:

The original discussions were held when the high school was closed and that really started in part because decisions were made really quickly, and the community didn’t necessarily want the school to be closed. And it really was a decision that many, many community members felt was done *to* them. Not *with* them. (Danvers, interview, April 16, 2020).

While the district was attempting to improve the neighborhood’s schools, Ms. Danvers highlights how the district proceeded to ignore community needs, making decisions *for*, rather than *with*, community members. Because of some of these past experiences, community members have been skeptical of the district’s current efforts to collaborate with residents through the “Reimagining Montbello” initiative. For example, Ms. Thompson, the DCSIM parent and staff member described some of the tensions in this initiative:

So, what happens with Reimagining Montbello, it sounds great on paper. The problem is what they’re presenting on paper is what their ideas are. Not necessarily what the community wants. And the thing is they developed that concept before they really even talked to the communities. Well, you’re coming into the community telling them: “Oh, we have a reimagination of what we want to do with Montbello”, but yet you didn’t have

time to talk to people beforehand before you already had it up in your mind that this is what you want to do. So, I think a lot of community people feel like them talking to the community now was an afterthought, and that's where the tension is coming from (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020).

Ms. Thompson describes a skeptical and disingenuous view of district efforts to collaborate. Her comments outline how previous experiences and hierarchical decision-making has eroded their current efforts to collaborate with the community. This distrust with the district has been on the forefront of recent interactions with Montbello residents. For example, in one Reimagining Montbello meeting, independent researchers reported to district leaders and community members that, in a survey, “a high percentage of numbers do not provide demographics. That is very clear to us—when people don’t answer the demographics, it means that they don’t trust the process. It’s as simple as that.” (Fieldnotes February 4, 2020).

As demonstrated above, hierarchical decision-making by the district leads community members to feel marginalized and may cause structural distrust. However, these structural forms of distrust with the district also affect the relationships and interactions between individuals. In the next section, I describe how structural and contextual distrust can lead to relational distrust among educational stakeholders in Montbello.

### **Relational Distrust: DCIS Montbello and School Faculty**

The contextual and structural forms of distrust present in Montbello trickle down into interpersonal interactions between stakeholders in Montbello education. Schultz (2019) calls this *relational distrust*, which is grounded in interpersonal relationships characterized by unpredictability and unreliability. In Montbello, and DCIS Montbello specifically, I see aspects

of relational distrust in two main areas: in relationships between school staff and families, and how staff turnover erodes a deeper understanding of community dynamics.

First, structural distrust stemming from district decisions has impacted how school faculty at DCISM are able to build relationships with their families. An earlier report on the neighborhood's schools noted how these challenges were exacerbated by district policies. As Schimel (2014) describes, when a new DCISM principal was appointed in 2014 after the founding principal left, parents felt sidelined. Indeed, the parents who agreed to participate in the hiring process shared that they only were invited to meet with one candidate. Schimel (2014) reported that "the result was conflict between the school community and the school's leader." Here, we can see how different layers of distrust interact with one another: district-level decision-making processes around hiring leaders and community engagement could be understood as structural distrust, but this *also* shaped aspects of relational distrust, where the school community distrusted their new school leader, even before they started their term.

A similar sense of distrust shaped how community members perceived—and interacted with—the new small schools that were located on the Montbello campus. While these schools were not directly involved in any decision-making, the fact that they remained on the campus, after the district decided to close Montbello High School, contributed to the perception that these schools had replaced the comprehensive school. DCISM leaders faced the consequences of the district's decision, in terms of parents and community members that tied the school to unpopular district policies. Ms. Thompson discussed how DCISM was impacted by the larger context around the closure decisions:

I do feel like when [DCISM] first came, I really feel like it was totally like just kind of disengaged from the community and it wasn't from any fault of theirs. I just think they

came on the end of the whole Montbello closure. Yeah, and there's a lot of animosity in the community because of that. (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020).

As Ms. Thompson notes, DCISM school leaders face the task of addressing distrust with parents and community members, even though they came into their leadership positions *after* the closure of Montbello High. Any person or school perceived to be closely affiliated with district decisions now feels the burden of distrust. This structural distrust now impacts the ways that individuals at DCISM can build relationships with families, therefore, manifesting into relational distrust.

This distrust is sharpened by the fact that school leaders are often perceived to be outsiders in the community. Since so few leaders and staff live in Montbello, parents and community members often see them as failing to understand Montbello dynamics. This outsider status, as community leader Donna Garnett notes, means that they need to do work to build trust:

I would say that there are no principals in any schools in Montbello that actually live in Montbello. There are none. So, if you want to be effective in this community, on behalf of your students and their families, you gotta be part of the community. And if you don't live here, then you're going to have to go the extra mile. Otherwise, we don't actually really trust you. And when you are tired of dealing with the inequities and the challenges of this community after two or three years and you put in your application to be a principal somewhere else, we're still the ones who are going to be here with our kids and our family. We don't want you to leave. We want you to make the long-term commitment. But we want you to be with us. (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020).

Garnett describes how “outsiders” need to prove that they work for and *with* the community. Her analysis echoes aspects of relational distrust. As Schultz (2019) explains, “relational distrust is

often personal and arises when an individual or group does not believe that the decisions or actions of other individuals and groups of people are based on a shared set of values or principles” (p. 6). Without a deep sense of community history and long-term commitments to schools, school leaders might need to go, in Garnett’s terms, the “extra mile” to work to *be part of* that community, perhaps through learning about—and sharing—the community’s values.

But here, and secondly, the turnover and inconsistency of school leaders, teachers and school staff may make it difficult for schools to engage in this learning process. It is hard to demonstrate a commitment to the community in a few short years, let alone develop any deep sense of the community’s history, aims and values. With so much turnover, school leaders and teachers do not have the time, nor the training to understand the fragmentation and distrust in Montbello. Furthermore, these leaders may not spend time getting to know the community adequately, and such failures can further erode trust in the school. In their report on principal turnover in Denver, Schimel (2014) described the relationship between students and one DCISM principal. According to Schimel, students were “offended that the new leader [redacted] didn’t spend time in the halls or getting to know students. ‘She didn’t know your name unless you were in trouble,’” shared one student. Schimel (2014) reported another example where this new principal was unaware that the students they talked to in the hallway were even students from their school. This principal left after one year at the school.

In contexts of distrust, it may be easy to find an individual—like this principal—to blame; it may be harder to understand how school choice policies, gentrification, and demographic shifts have affected dynamics in Montbello schools. As Schultz’s framework (2019) emphasizes, all three types of distrust—relational, structural, and contextual—are interwoven layers that shape interactions between students, staff, leaders, parents and community

members. In the previous example, structural policies—like hiring and co-location—and contextual factors—like gentrification and school choice—shape the field of action for this principal. Their interactions with students, while problematic, were shaped by co-location policies that combined many students in one building, and evaluation and hiring policies shaped their likelihood to be in the school for more than a few short years.

Here, small moments of distrust have deeper roots. As Schultz (2019) argues, “In fact, when relational distrust causes deep, enduring damage, it is almost always connected to one or both of the other forms of distrust” (p. 4). Although school leaders and faculty may only have the power and influence to address relational trust, Schultz (2019) underscores the importance of the structural and contextual aspects of the challenge. As she notes: “while simple relational distrust can sometimes be remediated by building trusting relationships, more enduring relational distrust demands that the political and historical roots of the distrust are addressed if there is to be lasting change” (p. 4). Building on this argument, in the next section, I describe how Montbello stakeholders must develop a layered, multi-faceted approach to rebuilding trust.

### **Rebuilding Trust: A Layered Approach**

As Montbello stakeholders work to develop a shared sense of community, they face many levels of distrust, a significant challenge. The district is also aware of the enormity of this challenge. Indeed, district leaders should be credited for recognizing distrust, and how past district decisions about Montbello schools have contributed to fueling distrust in Montbello. In one of the Reimagining Montbello community meetings, DPS Superintendent Cordova highlighted the district’s goal to rebuild trust and right the wrongs of the past:

I just want to name...There’s nobody in this meeting that can tell me more about the trust that has been broken more than I have, I understand that. And there’s nobody in this

meeting that wants to rebuild trust more than the people you hear talking about that. We have a long way to go to be in a place where you trust us. I get that and I think that we have to, every step along the way, continue to repeat: Your voice matters, we're here to listen to it. It's more than just listening; it's how we act on it. There aren't easy solutions. I wish we could unravel it without it feeling like it was unraveled. And how we move forward, we've got to be able to do it together (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020).

Here, Cordova emphatically recognizes the distrust present in the community and the need to rebuild trust through *listening* to community. In this vein, district leaders have positioned the new comprehensive school as evidence that they are listening to the community and seeking to bridge divides and rebuild trust. For example, Jennifer Bacon, the neighborhood's school district representative, wrote in the chat during a virtual Reimagining Montbello community meeting:

We are willing to make the commitments. We are no longer talking about a comprehensive high school, we're moving forward. We have put forward to build a new building. The community has asked for opportunities that an old system prohibited from happening. Past policy contributed to the divides in our community. This is a chance to unify and rectify. We deserve a place to all be on Friday nights. We need each other, and this is the first time where we have the political and actual will to do this (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020).

Both Cordova and Bacon underscored that rebuilding trust should start with listening to the community, and they hoped that the district could collaborate with community members to create a unified vision for the neighborhood's schools. However, as Schultz (2019) reminds us, such efforts—however well-meaning—must also recognize the contextual and structural factors that have shaped distrust between the district and community. As she argues, “if authorities, such as



the school board, simply address the relational distrust without articulating the structural causes, distrust will persist” (Schultz, 2019, p. 7). Here, just listening to the community—and trying to forge a new vision—may not be enough. As noted earlier in the chapter, when district leaders ignore political and economic forces, like the threat of gentrification, they may inadvertently reproduce distrust. Community members may view even well-intentioned moves with suspicion, as when Montbello residents linked the new school to the pressures of gentrification, rather than the district’s attempt to address past wrongs. The district risks undermining their goals if they do not address, or at least recognize, the contextual and structural factors that shape Montbello resident’s experiences. Some emerging experiences with the Reimagining Montbello initiative suggest these challenges. In a recent meeting, a long-time resident and activist in Montbello wrote in the chat: “DPS is repeating the mistakes of 10 years ago; the mistakes of 5 years ago; the mistakes of 2 years ago; the mistakes of the coming weeks” (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020). Here, this resident was cautioning that the district—in pushing ahead to re-open a comprehensive high school—might be disregarding the experiences of families in the three small high schools on the former Montbello campus, which are set to close after the 2021-2022 school year. In effect, the district may ignore some of the contextual and structural factors of distrust, leading them to repeat the very actions that contributed to that distrust.

Building on this analysis, I argue that a layered approach is needed in rebuilding trust. One way to begin, as the district is trying to do, is to listen to and engage with the community. Donna Garnett summarized some of these early efforts, “The leaders from the DPS side of the process express the mistakes that have been made on their part and our community and our students have gotten the raw end of the deal. They promise this is a new day” (Garnett, 2019, p. 3). Garnett continues, noting that she is cautious, but eager to embark in discussions about the

new building “so long as the community is leading the way...DPS, please don’t let us down” (p. 3). Given how central schools have been to the Montbello community, and its sense of identity, a community-led approach to designing a new Montbello school might be able to heal both community and school divisions. But designing a new school—in ways that center community engagement—may be more complicated than it appears. Namely, district, school and community stakeholders may have very different concepts of what counts as “parent and community engagement.” I explore these dynamics in the next chapter, analyzing how various stakeholders conceptualize engagement.

## **Chapter V: Concepts of Engagement**

The forms of distrust and fragmentation described in the previous chapters have created a complicated landscape for relationship-building and developing a sense of belonging in Montbello schools. In this chapter, I turn our focus to parent engagement practices in Montbello, focusing on how Montbello's school-community relationships are built amid broader distrust and disillusionment with the school district. In this chapter, I first document how engagement efforts in Montbello serve as a medium for belonging in a fragmented community. I then describe a dominant narrative about the "lack of engagement" in Montbello schools and delineate how district concepts of engagement do not fully recognize the engagement of Montbello parents and community members. I argue that these mismatched concepts lead to barriers in developing belonging in schools like DCISM. Lastly, I point to how Mr. Silva, DCISM's principal, navigates this complicated landscape to design the school's engagement approach in an attempt to fulfill district and community expectations for engagement.

### **Engagement as Medium for Belonging**

The context of distrust and fragmentation in Montbello complicate school leaders' efforts to design inclusive and affirming engagement practices for a unified community, especially when the answer to the question, "Who is Montbello?" remains unclear. Mr. Silva also acknowledges that this fragmentation has affected Montbello's identity. He discussed how local neighborhood schools could create a sense of community:

Sería mejor que las escuelas se mantuvieran locales, para que así puedan crear un verdadero sentido de comunidad, invertir en las escuelas y darles tiempo para que crezcan dentro de su comunidad para que sean centros comunitarios. No sólo escuela, sino que centros comunitarios donde las actividades de la comunidad se enfocan en la escuela,

involucran más a los padres y maestros, y crean un sentido de comunidad que se ha perdido en Denver debido al “choice”. El sentido de comunidad no existe como yo lo conozco en otros distritos. [It would be better that schools would stay local, so that this way they can create a true sense of community, invest in their schools and give them time to grow within their community to become community centers. Not to just be a school, but community centers where community activities are within the school, include more parents and teachers, and create a sense of community that has been lost in Denver due to “choice”. The sense of community doesn’t exist like I know it to exist in other districts.] (Silva, interview, December, 31, 2020).

Mr. Silva points to how school choice disrupts a sense of community in the neighborhood. He stressed the importance of “local” schools as community centers and how participation through schools can be a foundation for Montbello’s sense of community. He continued to explain just how interconnected engagement and developing a sense of community are:

El sentido de comunidad es importante porque para comenzar, no existía. Y eso todavía necesita ser mejorado. Y para lograr eso, se necesita tiempo y se necesita inversión, se necesita gente para que intencionalmente se vayan creando maneras de involucrar a las familias y generar una confianza. [A sense of community is important because, first of all, it didn’t exist. And that still needs to be improved. To achieve this, we need time and investment, we need people to intentionally create ways to engage families and develop trust.] (Silva, interview, December, 31, 2020).

Here, Mr. Silva directly links creating a sense of community—which, he explains, did not exist—with *intentionally* engaging families. For him, engaging families and community members in schools is another way to be immersed in community. The concept of

school/community interdependence has been documented in historically marginalized, urban communities (Ewing, 2018; Siddle-Walker, 1996). However, DCISM’s task of rebuilding the school as a unifying community center is a challenge, especially when dealing with the effects of structural distrust. Ms. Thompson, a longtime resident of Montbello and an African American mother who also works in DCISM, stressed that, “I think over the years, DCIS Montbello has started to develop a better relationship with the community. But like I said, there's still so much more that needs to be done” (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020). In DCISM’s case, building trusting relationships after the trauma of a school closure is essential. Additionally, school leaders have limited ability to change some of the district policies that contributed to distrust; therefore, they must rely on relational trust building to help Montbello develop a sense of community. And mainly, as Mr. Silva made clear, the way to achieve a sense of community is through engagement. Consequently, parent engagement efforts—and a narrative of parent engagement centered on belonging in Montbello—are key in building trust and a sense of belonging. However, I argue that the pervasive narrative of the “lack of engagement” in Montbello parents disrupts the potential to build a sense of belonging.

### **The “Lack of Engagement” of Parents**

In a conversation around community and parent engagement in Montbello, Donna Garnett, a white community organizer and leader, lamented that her organization “gets information out to the community in a bilingual format” but that parents were still not engaged in decision-making around the announcement of the new comprehensive high school:

And we, through the MUSE, the newspaper for Montbello, which is in Spanish and English...We continually put that information out. And so if people aren't being responsible enough to follow the news—and I'm not saying just our paper, that was all

over the news. It was in every broadcast on television and was in every paper both online and in paper (D. Garnett, interview, September 14, 2020).

While making real and sustained efforts to reach parents, Garnett shifts the responsibility to engage—and the failure to do so—on parents. In effect, she is arguing that they ‘put the information out there,’ and parents did not respond. I heard this narrative often in Montbello, with many school faculty, community leaders, and even other parents expressing frustration at the “lack of engagement,” especially of the Latino community. As described in Chapter 1, parents in marginalized communities are often mischaracterized and framed as uninvolved and disengaged (Hurtig & Dyrness, 2011; Valencia & Solórzano, 2004; Erickson, 1987; Hong, 2019; Olivos & Mendoza, 2013; Abdul-Adil & Farmer, Jr. 2006). This narrative obscures the many barriers to engagement that persist in Montbello. In my research, I heard parents and DCISM faculty describe parents’ work and home lives as limitations to their participation. For example, in our participatory research group, we surveyed parents on their barriers to engagement. Of 122 survey respondents, 57% cited their work schedules as the primary barrier in participating in engagement opportunities. Other barriers included appointments, events for their children, transportation difficulties, and school scheduling of events.

Since many of DCISM’s families are immigrants, the school often focuses on addressing their specific, pressing educational needs. Language barriers are ever-present as English dominates school environments in the U.S. Additionally, many Montbello immigrants are undocumented and afraid of approaching schools. One Mexican mother shed light on this issue:

La mayoría de personas con las que frecuentemente hablo y que tienen niños en las escuelas tienen miedo de ir, pero no es tanto porque les temen a los maestros, sino más bien temen que llegue ICE por ellos. Entonces viven con miedo. [The majority of people

that I speak with frequently and that have children in schools are afraid to go, but it's not because they are afraid of teachers, it's more because they are afraid that ICE will come for them. So they live with fear.] (interview, September 10, 2020)

This uncertainty and fear combine with immigrants' lack of knowledge about the school system in Montbello. The Mexican mother continued:

Yo veía a mis hijos perdidos y yo junto con ellos cuando recién llegamos. Es primeramente la barrera de la comunicación que es un tanto difícil. Y otra es, pues que no sabemos cómo se mueven aquí los asuntos. [I saw my kids lost and I with them when we had recently arrived. Primarily, it's the language barrier that is difficult. And the other is that we don't know how things work here.] (interview, September 10, 2020).

The mother highlighted the hardships of navigating a new environment in an unfamiliar language for many recent immigrants. With this context in mind, it is especially important to take a closer look at Garnett's statement about Latino families not following the news. With immigrant families worried about these threats, and when their recent arrival to the community permits no background knowledge of school choice, why would they know they should follow school news?

These barriers linked to language and immigration concerns create a particular need for engagement in Montbello schools. And with the racialized divisions in Montbello, it may be difficult to create a unified approach for engagement that includes Latino and African American families. Juana, a Central American mother, explained that engagement is “un trabajo de hormiguita porque cada caso es diferente. Usted aquí no tiene un común denominador, veo cosas tan diferentes” [the work of a small ant, because every case is different. You don't have here a common denominator, you see so many different things] (J., interview, April 23, 2020). In other

words, with so many different needs in Montbello, it's hard to fulfill every need with a single approach to engagement.

Other limitations to engagement are caused by structural barriers in schools, or when schools design engagement opportunities in ways that leave out already-marginalized parents. For example, setting engagement events during school hours positions parents' work life and responsibilities as barriers. Additionally, communication barriers occur when, like a DCISM administrator explained, "schools tend to be very acronym heavy and curriculum heavy, and a lot of the conversations are about curriculum," possibly discouraging families from participating in conversations they may not understand (interview, April 16, 2020).

Notably, one of the biggest barriers for engagement is viewing parents as enemies of teachers, which contributes to oppositional interactions between schools and families (Hong 2019). For example, Ms. Davis, a DCISM teacher, expressed that, "especially when you first start off in teaching, what I have found—and it was true for me too—is that teachers tend to be afraid of parents, you tend to hear horror stories" (Davis, interview, April 2, 2020). For her, this fear can damage the relationship, or cause it to become adversarial: "And I think that's where both parents and teachers sometimes stray. I mean, I think they're told that [it's a partnership] up front, but I don't think that's the way they start to look at it anymore. And so I think it becomes them vs. us or she vs. me" (Davis, interview, April 2, 2020). This antagonistic mindset impedes the creation of trusting relationships and discourages collaboration between schools and families.

Like the racialized divisions in Montbello, this perceived animosity may be exacerbated by cultural and language differences. Nationwide, the teaching force is overwhelmingly white when the majority of students enrolled in public schools are students of color (Meckler and



Rabinowitz, 2019). Denver reflects this trend: more than 70% of students are students of color but more than 70% of teachers identify as white (Mason, 2019). In DCISM, even with the administration's efforts to hire and retain more teachers of color, staff reflect this trend; white teachers make up 64.8% of total teachers at DCISM. These racial, cultural, and linguistic dynamics impact the ways that teachers interact with students and their families and create barriers for engagement. Ms. Davis, who is white and monolingual, explained how teachers' inability to cross cultural and language barriers maintains a power hierarchy within schools:

Specific to our school is definitely a language barrier. And I have that problem myself. I mean, I have no excuse, but I do. I should be better with my Spanish but I'm not. And so there's a lot of white teachers at our school and other people who do not speak Spanish or are not proficient and it has become a barrier. And especially with the demographics of our school, and just in the culture of being Hispanic. You know, people who run the schools or people who are in a place of authority, we don't question. We don't go in there and we don't make waves and that unfortunately includes silence on what [families] may need or what their feelings are towards something. Or sometimes they may be even afraid to pick up the phone. So I feel like there's cultural barriers. There are language barriers.

(Davis, interview, April 2, 2020).

Ms. Davis expanded on how white or monolingual teachers reinforce school structures that marginalize families, focusing on white teachers' unwillingness to reach out to Latino parents. She continued, "In fact, I feel like the majority of the staff, including our administration, can be very afraid of certain parents." This fear may manifest in avoidance of parents, particularly across linguistic and cultural lines. I witnessed this first-hand. At DCISM, administrators provided teachers structured time to call families to provide them with information about their

children. Before their Professional Development workshops on Wednesday afternoons, Mr. Silva provided teachers access to translators if they needed to talk to Spanish-speaking or French-speaking parents. For about 6 months, I volunteered to translate for teachers and waited in the office to assist teachers during these calls home. In those 6 months, not one teacher took advantage of those services. Avoidance of families is also seen through the low numbers of teachers conducting home visits at DCISM. Denver Public Schools compensates teachers who conduct home visits with stipends. In addition, home visits were a part of an engagement campaign led by DCISM administrators. Yet, according to Mr. Silva's records, only 23 teachers at DCISM—32% of teachers—conducted home visits in the fall semester of 2019<sup>11</sup>. Of the teachers who conducted home visits, half were white. Comparing this data to DCISM's teacher demographics, I found that only 24% of white teachers conducted home visits, yet 50% of nonwhite teachers conducted home visits. This lack of participation in home visits and calls to families reinforce Ms. Davis' comments and point to another formidable barrier: white teachers who are not trained in creating cross-cultural relationships may exacerbate the distrust between schools and families and create another obstacle to engagement.

Fundamentally, the narrative about the “lack of engagement” and the many barriers to engagement create a landscape where parents are not expected to participate in schools. This assumption can lead schools to neglect creating welcoming spaces for parents. It can motivate community stakeholders to disregard families who are “not engaged” and, as a consequence, may exclude them from decision-making and community events. The school district has attempted to address this narrative and improve levels of engagement in Montbello. However,

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<sup>11</sup> This is the last semester with reliable data before the onset of Covid-19.

their concepts of engagement do not align with those of many Montbello parents and community members, which may prompt more fragmentation and distrust.

### **District Concepts of Engagement**

The limitations and freedoms that individual schools may have in designing their parent engagement opportunities are impacted by the several layers of federal, state, and district policies and practices. For example, the “lack of engagement” narrative in Montbello, along with federal policies like Title I, sets a clear goal for DPS in designing their approach to engagement: motivating more family and community members to be engaged (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Here, I describe the district’s approach to engagement since it powerfully shapes the ways that individual schools like DCISM can envision and implement their own approach to engagement in the community.

As detailed in Chapter 1, engagement practices in American schools have been largely influenced by neoliberal ideals that have led to marketized school policies and practices, especially in marginalized communities (Lipman, 2011; Marsh et al., 2015; Krings et al., 2018; Pappas, 2012). I argue that many district engagement efforts align with these market-influenced ideas for education reform. One example is the district school choice events. Parents are encouraged to attend school tours and an annual “School Choice Event” for each region in Denver. I attended one in January of 2020 as many parents met school faculty and “shopped” around for schools in the Far Northeast Enrollment Zone. This event, held at a co-located campus in Green Valley Ranch, was divided into an elementary and secondary school section and was designed to help parents learn more about their choices. School faculty, set up behind tables, strived to “sell” their school. At DCISM’s table, it looked like this:

An African American family walked up to the table and my dad shook their hands firmly and said, “Nice to meet you, I’m the principal.” He started to explain to them a little about the school and said that they could sign up for a raffle if they put their name and their phone number so that they could win a t-shirt. The mom said, “Oh, that’s nice”. And she wrote her information down (fieldnotes, January 22, 2020).

These events embody the district’s policies as reflected in their “Family Engagement Policy (Including Title I Family Engagement).” One of the criteria for schools is to “inform parents of school choices and learning opportunities within the district, including but not limited to, information on open enrollment, choice programs and charter school options” (Denver Public Schools, 2016). This wording emphasizes informing parents about school choice in DPS, explicitly defining choice as part of school-parent relationships and placing parent engagement in the service of school choice. By placing this expectation in the parent engagement policy as required by Title I—the federal policy that aims to ensure the academic success of low-SES and racially minoritized students—marketization is discursively solidified as an avenue to decision-making power for marginalized families. And as demonstrated in the description of the event above, the structures for schools to interact with parents are geared towards “selling their school” in a marketplace of education, positioning parents as consumers. Therefore, district policy and practices reflect neoliberal reform language that shape—and limit—parent opportunities for engagement.

Just as market-influenced approaches to engagement are written into district policies, they are enforced through strategies for school improvement. A recent report, *Operation Moving Forward*, developed for the district by outside consultants, aimed to provide actionable strategies for school leaders in the Far Northeast to fulfill the Denver 2020 plan, a set of goals all schools

were to achieve by the year 2020. In this plan, suggestions were based on for-profit company models of success. For example, one area of improvement was to provide “authentic customer service”:

While strong internal customer service is simple, what customers really crave is authenticity. Peoplemetrics’ research on customer engagement indicates “that companies that create authentic relationships with their customers achieve higher customer engagement scores” (2011). In education, higher customer engagement translates to families and students that are excited to share their experiences with their peers, which drives enrollment. Making coming into a school a pleasure also drives growth in family participation” (Robertson & Schwartz, 2016, p. 31).

In this passage, the marketization of education is clear: parents are positioned as customers and the benefits of “customer service” concentrate on school enrollment. Consequently, engagement becomes a mechanism to ensure higher enrollment. As the report states, “when families do not feel comfortable coming into a school, they are unlikely to come to a school with any problems. If a school has the best academics, wraparound support and social emotional teaching in a region but families do not feel comfortable in the building, they will not send their children to the school” (Robertson & Schwartz, 2016, p. 31). These district policies and practices therefore create opportunities for engagement that mimic customer service approaches and shape parent roles in terms of consumers or customers.

District approaches also tend to perceive engagement as a means to accomplish higher academic achievement, a common goal of engagement efforts more generally (U.S. Department of Education, 2005; Nakagawa, 2000; Sanders, 2009; Baird, 2015; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Much of the district initiatives around engagement are meant to help parents guide students to

achieve at higher levels, confining school-community relationships to academic concerns. District definitions of parent engagement call for parents to seek “opportunities to support and engage in community partnerships in order to support the mission of the school” (Denver Public Schools, 2016). District policies also require principals, teachers, and all school staff to help “families understand the educational process and their role in supporting student success,” and develop “families’ ability to strengthen student learning by educating and empowering them as academic partners (Denver Public Schools, 2016). These goals, although perhaps successful in raising achievement, limit other opportunities for engagement. A DCISM administrator, Ms. Danvers, share how school events designed to provide information for parents may limit these other opportunities for engagement:

For example, there’s specific meetings that are directed by the district. You need to have a concurrent enrollment meeting...And you do tend to bring out only certain parents. The problem with that is then the parent has come for one meeting. They sometimes don’t necessarily come for the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, or 5th. So, if you had something one night, you may not be likely to get that parent to come back and necessarily be engaged (Danvers, interview, April 16, 2020).

In the example provided by Ms. Danvers above, the concurrent enrollment meeting invited parents to learn about the opportunity for their child to receive college credit for courses they take in high school. However, as Ms. Danvers explains, although these types of engagement are necessary, and may provide information that may incentivize higher student achievement, they are also limited. Such required meetings do not encourage meaningful and *consistent* participation for parents, nor do they help the school build relationships with parents or involve them in decision-making. Such engagement efforts reflect a larger trend in engagement

initiatives designed to bridge opportunity gaps for families, but are not designed for equitable collaborations (Ishimaru, 2020). Such meetings continue to position parents as customers in search of a service and as recipients of information. Furthermore, this approach prioritizes academic achievement as the main purpose of engagement and school.

These approaches fulfill district goals but may fail to meaningfully engage parents in a community that strives to be heard. Present school district efforts do not provide enough space for parents to participate in school and district decisions. To illustrate, Ms. Gray, a former assistant principal at DCISM, claimed that more parents want to feel “taken in or that people cared to hear what they had to say” and that presently, for parents, it feels like, “It’s just: ‘OK. Well, they’re parents from the neighborhood, whatever’ and that they weren’t taken in” (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). Here, Ms. Gray demonstrated how district approaches to engagement fail to *listen* to parents. The district may successfully engage parents through providing services and information. But this school-centric approach operates on the assumption that *schools* know what is best for children (Hong, 2011; 2019). Mr. Denis, a DCISM assistant principal, explained that the district usually guides schools to use this approach: “And oftentimes when schools ask for parent involvement, it’s always: You need to get involved for the purpose of meeting *our* goals. Not what are your goals and how can the school be a mechanism for you to meet your goals?” (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020). Mr. Denis questioned this school-centered approach that ignores parents’ visions in the construction of school practices. He also elaborated on the marginalization of parent and community voices when the school district dominates conversations around decision-making and engagement:

And so how do you involve community members, bring them to the table, but not be condescending to them...like: “you guys don’t know what education is. Let me tell you

what education is” and that’s what DPS’s position has been. Well, that’s the attitude or the effects of the DPS decisions have had on the community, is being very condescending.

So how do you bring the community to the table and share research-based approaches to pedagogy and involve them in the process of making those decisions with data and with people who truly have the best interest of their children at heart. And to me, those people are educators of color and the parents (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).

Mr. Denis stressed that parents and others who share similar experiences to students in Montbello—like educators of color—are valuable stakeholders since they truly understand students and families. By creating school-centered engagement opportunities that enforce hierarchical decision-making, the district sidelines parents and community members—exactly the stakeholders with the ability to provide a vision for education that the community wants.

The structure of the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) office, which directs district engagement initiatives, also plays a role in developing district concepts of engagement. FACE has a separate department for Community Engagement Advocacy and Strategy (Denver Public Schools, n.d.). In their approach to community engagement, district leaders seek to include community stakeholders in a “community-led, district supported approach” to decision-making, which may include families but also community partners, school leaders, and school staff (Denver Public Schools, n.d.). FACE designs several forms of community engagement, such as opportunities to participate in decision-making committees. For example, in 2021, Montbello teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members were encouraged to apply to be on a principal selection committee for the new comprehensive high school in Montbello. These efforts emphasize the participation of other community stakeholders, distinguishing itself from traditional district parent engagement strategies.



However, district approaches to community engagement have also been criticized by community members. For example, Brandon Pryor, a community leader and activist, asserted:

I don't think that the district does a good job at creating an atmosphere where parents feel welcome. And the engagement from the district is pitiful. Let's be honest. FACE, the department of DPS—they don't know how to engage community. They're the family and community engagement department. And they don't know how to engage community. They don't know how to listen to community. The district has a paternalistic attitude where they feel like they know what is best for everyone, instead of listening to communities. People know what's best for their community. They live there. (B. Pryor, interview, August 28, 2020).

Pryor describes the top-down approach of the district as a “paternalistic attitude” towards community voices that does not truly take into account the community vision for their schools. Instead of listening, the district further silences community members through the types of engagement opportunities it provides.

The district’s longstanding failures to listen to community members and parents have led many Montbello residents to perceive district engagement efforts as disingenuous. In 2017, community members demonstrated a lack of faith in a district process that sought out community participation in decisions around the restructuring of a Montbello elementary school; even though the “district solicited their feedback, they have no faith [district] officials will take it seriously” (Asmar, 2018a). Even Montbello school leaders, like a principal of one of three small high schools, noted this distrust at the same meeting: “This is the illusion of community engagement. How can these be named as priorities? Whose voices were invited to the table? The work of the [Education Commission] has been disingenuous” (Asmar, 2018a). Nancy Jackson,

the founder of a local Montbello organization expanded: “They create these town hall meetings, forums, etc., but they already have the plan and their policies set in place. Whether the policies and plans are beneficial to the community itself or not, the businessmen and wealthy surrounding fortunate counterparts of these community members have the power to set these in place,” (Widman et al., 2018). Jackson’s words demonstrate how the district continues to foment distrust and undermines their own engagement goals.

I argue that this cycle of distrust is impacted by a superficial understanding of the community and parent concepts of engagement. The district’s focus on achievement and enrollment as goals for successful engagement does not align with how parents or community members hope to be involved. I suggest that by separating family engagement from community engagement, the district attempts to remove parents from the context that profoundly shapes their school and engagement experiences. I contend that to more accurately match their engagement approach to that of the Montbello community concept of engagement, the district must prioritize schools as central, unifying community institutions and as foundations for collective advocacy in the community.

### **Parent and Community Concepts of Engagement**

When I asked Ms. Thompson, an African American mother, what her ideal relationship between a school and the community would be like, she responded:

Our kids aren't going to be successful if everybody is on different pages. So it's just about everybody being unified, unified for one call. And that call is to make DCIS, you know, the best school possible. And it could be done. It's going to take some work, but it has to be a collaborative effort with parents and teachers (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020).

Here, Ms. Thompson stressed the need for a unified vision and collaboration between schools and parents. Other parents also held a similar view, especially around their roles as supportive partners in education. For example, Lorena, a Central American mother, describes one mode of engagement as providing her son with the tools for success: “Puede que yo me encargue de todo, de lo que es la ropa, la comida, los cuadernos, lápices, llevarlo a tiempo, estar presente en todo lo que sea de la escuela [It’s that I am in charge of everything, of the clothes, the food, the notebooks, the pencils, take him to school on time, be present in everything that has to do with school]” (L., interview, April 14, 2020). Here, Lorena points to the ways that parents are engaged from home, providing their children with the basics of being prepared for school. However, I found that parents’ concepts of engagement went beyond goals for academic achievement and the “greatest hits” of engagement, which expect parents to participate from home or in school-centered activities (Baird, 2015).

First, many parents described how they positioned the school as the center of community. In this sense, they defined engagement as a reciprocal relationship where parents are involved in their child’s education *and* the school provides a space for the community. For example, Pryor explained, “I think a lot of parents want to be involved. They don't know how. It's a two-way street, right? Parents want to be involved, but they need a platform or avenue to be involved. Not necessarily roll out the red carpet for them but create different programs and wrap-around services for community to involve parents,” (B. Pryor, interview, August 28, 2020). Teresa, a Mexican mother, mirrored this call for a school to be the center of community. She noted how school staff can provide the community with education, not just its young students:

Lo que a mí me ha tocado en mis experiencias de las escuelas, es que cuando el enlace familiar es bueno, trae la oportunidad para los padres. Trae las clases de inglés, las clases

de cocina...la gente se va involucrando de poquito en poquito. Entonces cuando ya está esa conexión de darle esa necesidad al padre, más bien a nosotros, entonces tú vas a atraer a más personas [What has been my experience in schools is that when the family liaison is good, they bring the opportunities to parents. They bring English classes, cooking classes...people begin to get involved little by little. So when the connection is there in addressing the needs of parents, our needs, you will attract more people (T., interview, August 20, 2020).

Here, Pryor and Teresa count on schools being centers of community and point to how this approach can encourage more participation and engagement from parents. This view of engagement reflects Hong's (2011) ecology of parent engagement, which seeks to situate schools within communities and conceptualizes engagement as a "dynamic process that cuts across relationships, events, and settings" (p. 181). This concept of engagement inextricably links schools to family and community needs—not just student needs.

Parents who were already engaged at DCISM hoped to see increased participation from other families. Throughout my research, I heard many parents say it is necessary for parents to be more involved to achieve community and family empowerment. Lorena points to engagement as a way to empower herself and her community: "Y al trabajar tú en la comunidad, tú conoces tus derechos. [And by working in the community, you know your rights]" (L., interview, April 14, 2020). She later explained how she became engaged in her son's education when he experienced bullying and conflicts with a teacher:

Entonces opté por dejar de trabajar y nos cambiamos para Montbello para que él cambiara de escuela y lo tuvieron que mandar a terapia. [So I opted to leave my job and

we moved to Montbello so that he could change schools and we had to send him to therapy] (L., interview, April 14, 2020).

Lorena learned to be engaged in her child's education when she acted in ways she felt would benefit her son. In this case, the family moved to another town and she stopped working to pay more attention to her son. Parents advocating for their own children is a common way that parents engage in their child's education. In an ethnographic study of student achievement, Demerath (2009) describes how middle and upper-middle class parents negotiate with teachers to advocate for their own children, consequently creating advantages that help their children to outpace those from less privileged backgrounds. However, Lorena's advocacy does not stop at her children. Her awareness of her son's problems in school led her to advocate for all Montbello children. In preparation for our PAR group's presentation to DCISM teachers, Lorena stressed that "estamos preocupados por todos los estudiantes, no solo nuestros hijos. [we are worried about all students, not just our children]" (fieldnotes, December 4, 2019). Therefore, Lorena points to another concept of engagement widely seen in Montbello: engagement as closely tied to *collective* advocacy for community.

Other parents and community members also shared this concept of engagement. Brandon Pryor marked the start of his career as a Far Northeast football coach as the time when he became aware of educational injustices stemming from school choice. This awareness prompted him to engage in education advocacy. He described how student athletes attending different schools and having different counselors, bell schedules, and dismissal times contributed to obstacles that prohibited them from developing a unified team with adequate training. He elaborated: "So we got into activism as coaches. We started seeing the inequities that existed inside of the schools because of the school reforms, the co-locations, things of that nature. And

we started fighting” (B. Pryor, interview, August 28, 2020). His awareness of how school choice affected educational opportunities influenced him to call for more family participation in district and school decision-making in Montbello.

DCISM parents also highlighted speaking out as an essential form of participation through advocacy. For example, Sra. Aguilar, a Mexican mother, said that knowing the DCISM school leadership truly listens to them encourages better relationships and more engagement:

Pero la verdad es que sí lo escuchan a uno, lo toman en cuenta. Como dice el dicho: el que no habla, Dios no lo oye. Entonces uno debe de dar su opinión, escuchar a los demás—que también es importante—y respetar las opiniones de los demás. Pero si uno quiere un cambio, realmente quiere que algo mejore, pues uno debe luchar por eso, ¿no? [The truth is that they do listen to you, they take you into account. Like the saying goes: God doesn’t hear those who don’t speak (or a more common expression in English: the squeaky wheel gets the grease). So, one must give one’s opinion, listen to others--which is also important-- and respect others’ opinions. But if one wants a change, really want something to improve, then one must fight for that, right?] (Aguilar, interview, September 10, 2020).

According to Sra. Aguilar, knowing that they can trust school leaders to *listen* encourages more parents to advocate for change. This concept of engagement as advocacy calls for school leaders to prioritize listening as a central engagement practice to create space for collective advocacy, especially in a community like Montbello. Mr. Denis, an assistant principal at DCISM, reiterates how important this concept of engagement is in a majority community of color:

In communities of color, it's not uncommon for one parent to stand in the gap for another. And so how do we elevate those voices? We have a lot of immigrant Spanish-only

speaking parents. But they stand in the gap for at least 20 other parents because they have the same concerns for the kids that these other parents have. So, why not elevate their voices? And we've done that to an extent at DCIS. We've had parents come speak to our teachers, and I think that's going a long way in rehabilitating some of the mindsets that some of our teachers might have of immigrant families (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).

Mr. Denis demonstrates how DCISM school leaders design school practices that include some of these varied concepts of engagement. Such practices may help transform engagement practices in ways that position parents as educational leaders and help educators develop more complex understandings of nondominant families (Ishimaru, 2020; Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016). By integrating Montbello parents' concepts of collective advocacy and schools as centers of community, more inclusive forms of engagement can be designed at DCISM. To do this, Montbello school leaders might look to engagement that already exists in Montbello. Having a deeper understanding of community concepts of engagement can help schools design opportunities for parents *and* community members to be engaged in their schools and for schools to be a central institution for the community.

Similar to parents, nonprofit organizations in Montbello approach engagement as a way to meet the needs of community members and empower the community as a whole. For example, the Montbello Organizing Committee (MOC) takes the time to research the community's needs *and* strengths, in shaping the organization's efforts to address community problems. Garnett explained that through this research, they identified the top four issues in the community: "So we feel like those are our marching orders and will keep working on those orders and on those issues" (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020). Garnett's "marching orders" are guided by

what the *community* says they need. This is an understanding that many communities value: acting on their needs and expertise. For example, Teresa explained that in her own work with other Montbello *conectoras*<sup>12</sup>, she also followed these “marching orders,” instead of arbitrarily designing plans for community events:

Entonces todas estas actividades se dieron a propuesta de las personas. No que nosotros dijéramos: “Ah, mañana vamos a hacer un cafecito, se me ocurre hacer un cafecito”. Sino que *ellos mismos* pidieron. [So all of the activities occurred because of individual proposals. Not that we said: “Oh, tomorrow we will make a coffee social hour, I have this idea to have a coffee social hour.” No, they [community members] personally asked for one.] (T., interview August 20, 2020).

Furthermore, Montbello leaders, activists, and residents are uniquely positioned to know about community needs and how best to solve them. Teresa continued to explain how her knowledge of community needs allowed her to find ways to be engaged and serve her community:

Entonces hicimos el grupo de Mujer, Fuerza y Sentimiento. Y lo hicimos más bien en ese tema de mujeres para que siempre haya recursos o para darles información, o hablarles de depresión porque veíamos que en este tiempo estaba muy fuerte inmigración (ICE). Teníamos conocidas que tenían pulseras por parte de inmigración y tenían miedo de salir a la tienda. [So we made the group Woman, Strength, and Feeling. And we did it on that topic of women so that there would always be resources or to give them information, or talk to them about depression because we saw during that time that immigration [raids] were common. We knew women that wore bracelets<sup>13</sup> given to them by immigration (ICE) and they were afraid to go out to the store.] (T., interview, August 20, 2020).

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<sup>12</sup> *Conectoras* are Latina women working as community connectors and organizers.

<sup>13</sup> These tracking devices were used through ICE’s Alternatives to Detention program.



Teresa described how many immigrant women living with uncertainty. Because of personal relationships and her knowledge of this situation, she organized social and emotional support for these women. Her approach to creating opportunities for engagement embodied listening and adhering to the needs of those she knew. Her approaches were also shaped by her and other *conectora*'s research into both the needs and the strengths of the Montbello community. I argue that the school district's understanding of engagement could be informed by these practices, which might help them better achieve their goals of rebuilding trust and relationships.

### **Recognizing all Concepts of Engagement**

Although several Montbello residents and organizations highlight the importance of collective advocacy and the role of schools as centers of community, these concepts of engagement are not necessarily recognized by the district. While the district suggests that there is a "lack of engagement," parents and community members have voiced concerns about school closures in highly attended meetings. Garnett describes a meeting about the Montbello High School closure with Tom Boasberg during his administration as Superintendent:

The Superintendent came to the community. It was supposed to be sort of a final 90-minute kind of conversation, sharing: 'Here's what we have come up with. Is this what we're asking for?' And it ended up being a four-hour meeting where people became angrier and angrier and his final comment, which just really shut the whole thing down, was, 'I'm going to make the decision about what's best for the children.' And it's a wonder that people didn't tear him from limb to limb. People were so angry. (D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020).

This account demonstrates that parents are indeed engaged when they resist what they see as an imposition of district goals. How can the district view parents as disengaged when there is so

much resistance to district policies and when community meetings are rife with conflict? Why do parents' resistance and vocal dissent not count as engagement? This type of engagement, obviously valued by parents and community members, is not a recognized form of engagement by the district.

This clash of concepts leads to a miscommunication of what are considered valuable forms of participation in education (particular kinds of participation, in particular ways, at particular meetings). But not all parents accepted these roles passively. During a Reimagining Montbello meeting in February of 2020, researchers hired by the district presented data on community views surrounding the new Montbello campus. As Montbello community members and school staff sat in the Montbello school campus library, researchers mentioned that few Latino community members were consulted about the rebuild versus renovation process. District leaders promised to engage Latinos but their solutions were limited to surveying the community. For example, Cordova, the superintendent said, "We had a great suggestion actually from a community member that we should engage in some more scientific polling. So, we are working to get a polling firm to actually do polling and to use that effort to try to get a more representative sample through a telephone survey." Later, in response to criticism that the district had not contacted the Latino community for their input, Jennifer Bacon, the Board representative for Montbello, said, "So yes, we just completed some surveys, but we've been having this conversation in Montbello for a long time in a lot of different ways. And so, for example, I remember knocking on doors, going out to community, rather than having a meeting here with students who went to X High School, out into Montbello, and talking in Spanish to family members at their homes" (fieldnotes, February 4, 2020). Ms. Bacon's response focuses on engagement in terms of answering surveys or polls. However, *collective and organized*

participation to advocate for community needs (or oppose policies) was not understood as a kind of engagement.

After Ms. Bacon's comment, Jaqui, a Mexican mother at DCISM, challenged district leaders and volunteered to help the Board of Education get more surveys out to the Latino community. When the district subsequently acknowledged that only 75 surveys were completed in the whole community, Jaqui noted:

*Yo personalmente* he hecho más de 3,500 encuestas en la comunidad. Una sola persona. No puedo creer que todo un distrito no pueda hacer más de 75. Si necesitan ayuda, aquí estamos, aquí está la comunidad para ayudarlos. No necesitan estar yendo o buscando y dándonos información que no es adecuada para nuestra comunidad. [I *personally* have conducted more than 3,500 surveys in the community. One sole person. I can't believe that a whole district can't do more than 75. If you need help, we are here, the community is here to help you. You don't need to go and find us and give us information that isn't adequate for our community.] (fieldnotes, February 4, 2020).

Jaqui refused a concept of engagement that relied on providing information and asking for input from parents. She demanded a role in the decision-making process and also in the data collecting process. She offered her own skills—something that the district had not taken into consideration—to ensure that the Latino community truly had a voice in this decision.

District concepts of engagement—that position parents as consumers or recipients of information—often fail to recognize parent and community advocacy efforts for a more equitable education. The district has attempted to incorporate parent and community voice in decision-making, but have relied on surveys to do so. The tendency reflects some of the same consumer and managerial approaches to engagement noted in the report *Operation Moving Forward*,

which argued: “in order to fill needs, they must be found. This means surveying. Schools must survey what families need, what students need, and what teachers need on a much more regular basis” (Robertson & Schwartz, 2016, p. 31). Like the suggestions in the Reimagining Montbello meeting, the district has relied on surveys to include parent voices several times throughout the timeframe of my study. For example, they conducted surveys for input on the process to rebuild or renovate the Montbello campus, on the desired characteristics for a principal for the new high school and middle school, and whether parents wanted to send their children to in-person classrooms during the pandemic. However, scholars like Olivos (2020) have criticized the reliance on surveys for measuring family needs and interests, as well for prioritizing abstract concepts like “family satisfaction.” He argues that it is not possible to measure satisfaction without first understanding families’ educational beliefs and values about education and their knowledge about the U.S. school system (Olivos, 2020).

Because of the power of the district to shape and guide school policies and practices of engagement, alternate community-driven practices of engagement can easily be overlooked. In my fieldwork at DCISM, I observed how many teachers already understand engagement in ways that reflect mainstream, school-centric engagement practices. For example, one DCISM teacher, Ms. Davis, mirrored the district’s understanding of the role of parents when she idealized parents who provided funds for class materials. For her, the role of parents as supportive partners should be a delicate balance between providing funds and resources and not interfering with the teacher’s more “professional” role:

I want the best of both worlds, I guess. Parents who are supportive, who have the money and energy and time to put into schools. But also be respectful of what we do as professionals, and I will respect them as parents and as guardians. I’m looking for that

happy medium of a partnership. So that would be the dream (laughs). But it's not like if the dream is not to be at a white school or Hispanic school, or a Black school. The dream is really to have the parental involvement in the right way (Davis, interview, April 2, 2020).

For Ms. Davis, the definition of a partnership focuses on the *school's* mission, with no regard to what parents' missions might be. This “right way” to be engaged, reflects some of the “uniformity in how schools design parent participation,” and reflect wider assumptions that there is “*one way to involve families*” (Hong, 2019, p. 5). Furthermore, Lewis-McCoy (2014) argues that a “less formally recognized resource”—white and affluent parents who provide monetary and material resources—shapes expectations around parent engagement, yet exacerbates educational inequality. More importantly, in defining parents' ideal roles, Ms. Davis does not challenge her position of power within education systems, where unspoken power dynamics continue to position teachers in established, hegemonic roles of expertise (Whyte & Karabon, 2016). Lastly, by advocating for “the right way” to do parental involvement, she removes parents from their context, disregarding culture, class, and language as factors that impact how parents might interact with school faculty and navigate education practices. School leaders who wish to counter this concept of engagement face challenges, especially if they cannot count on district support. In the next section, I describe how Mr. Silva, the DCISM principal, attempts to navigate the school's approach to engagement in Montbello in ways that balance both district and community expectations for engagement.

### **A Principal's Balancing Act: Creating a School Concept of Engagement**

Mr. Silva faces the task of designing a school approach to engagement that aligns with district *and* community concepts of engagement, both which influence how Montbello

stakeholders interact with each other. In other words, he—and the school—are stuck in the middle, attempting to navigate several concepts of engagement. I found that Mr. Silva often navigated this balancing act through strategic shifts in his language. Like the district, Mr. Silva distinguished between two types of engagement: parent engagement and community engagement. When defining the former, Mr. Silva represented parents' roles as approaching the school to participate in school activities, therefore aligning with district policy. For example, he stated: "Estoy invitando a las familias a que sean parte del proceso de las escuelas y de los eventos y que también participen en proyectos educativos. [I am inviting families to be part of the process of schools and of events, and also to participate in educative projects.] (Silva, interview, January 27, 2019). Here, Mr. Silva defined parent engagement in school-centric terms. The principal's discourse aligns with policy goals to inform parents of school expectations and processes, even though he goes on to explain that his main purpose, in creating such events, is to prepare parents to be advocates for their own children. He noted, "Lo ideal sería que la mayoría de familias tengan una voz. Que puedan abogar por sus hijos y sentir la libertad de llegar a la escuela. [The ideal would be for the majority of families to have a voice. That they could advocate for their children and feel the freedom to come to the school.] (Silva, interview, January 27, 2019). While his own goals may be more expansive, aligning his events—and descriptions of those events—with required district policies and mainstream discourses allows him to fulfill his obligations to the district: parent engagement for increased academic achievement.

However, the principal also challenged school-centric narratives in defining community engagement in ways that embody more communal ideals and goals. Mr. Silva explained:

Es más que todo aportar servicios a la comunidad y darles un sentido de servicio de la escuela hacia su comunidad. De tomar la responsabilidad de servir a la comunidad y

promover justicia social. Mientras que las familias, pueden servir de apoyo para la escuela, pero que también la escuela sea apoyo para los padres de familia. [It's mostly providing services to the community and giving a sense of service of the school towards its community. To take the responsibility of serving the community and to promote social justice. While families can serve as support for the school, but also the school support parents.] (Silva, interview, January 27, 2019).

Here, he clearly marked the school's civic responsibility in positioning the school as a center for the community, aligning with community concepts of engagement. Mr. Silva also indicates that community engagement is about promoting social justice, and he sees the school playing a role in advocating for such goals. Furthermore, his definition of community engagement strays from academic achievement as the preeminent goal; in contrast, he alludes to the idea that engagement can become a means to strive for social justice in Montbello.

Mr. Silva's ideas about community engagement influenced his interactions with district leaders and parents. After Jaqui volunteered to help engage the community in the previously described Reimagining Montbello meeting, Mr. Silva spoke up in support of her statement and suggested other solutions to engaging the Latino community to district leaders:

I want to confirm what Ms. Jaqui is saying. She is one of our 12 parent leaders. We have Latino parents in our leadership team, we have French speaking African parents in our team, African American parents on our team. And they are more than willing to help with the surveys. We can get them going. (fieldnotes, February 4, 2020)

By volunteering parent leaders to help in the process of data collection, Mr. Silva sought spaces where parents and community members are more than heard—they are engaged in the *process* of data collection and decision-making, an equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020). This view of

engagement and positioning of parents demonstrates a flexible approach to engagement that has the potential to address district goals of academic achievement *and* community goals of community-led advocacy. More importantly, because of his position as a principal, Mr. Silva has the influence to advance community-centered concepts of engagement in DCISM's approach to engagement efforts, while still meeting district goals. I turn to a number of his initiatives to foreground parent leadership and decision-making in the next chapter.

Beyond creating new decision-making spaces, I argue that schools should also focus on creating spaces of belonging for families. Such spaces might be especially powerful in Montbello, where fragmentation and distrust pervade social and educational interactions and engagement in educational practices. To build belonging, school leaders must listen. Listening, as Schultz (2019) argues, "is much more than giving people an opportunity to talk. It involves being open to learning in each moment. Listening also involves being attentive to the local, historical, social, and political contexts and attuned to the interpersonal dynamics of the individuals involved in the process," (p. 92). Foregrounding respect and dignity, and paying attention to history and context, may help to counteract some of the consequences of historical distrust and heal divisions. Listening can also build belonging by recognizing the traumas parents have experienced, as well by acknowledging the impact of previous experiences of distrust and disrespect with schools.

DCIS Montbello is in a unique position to develop this sense of belonging, especially for Latino immigrants. As described in Chapter 1, providing space for transnational experiences and identities can encourage a sense of belonging, especially for border-crossers struggling to belong (Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2019; Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020). Mr. Silva's ideas of community and engagement lead him to mobilize DCISM resources to potentially develop transformational



space of belonging. Some of these possibilities can be seen through DCISM's engagement practices and through Mr. Silva's personal approach to developing relationships with families. In the following chapter, I describe how the principal's identity as a Salvadoran immigrant has allowed him to design an approach to engagement that can build belonging in a community shaped by global and local fragmentation.

## **Chapter VI: Pedagogies of Acompañamiento: Building Trust and Belonging**

Soo Hong (2019) writes that “one of the clearest windows into a school’s relationship with students’ families is its family engagement practices” (p. 5). In this chapter, I turn to family engagement practices at DCISM. I build on my work, in the previous chapters, to outline the very different understandings of engagement held by district, school and parent leaders. I turn to how the focal school of this study—DCISM—negotiated these conflicting ideas of engagement as it worked to build relationships with families. Family engagement practices, I argue, are windows into broader power dynamics. In Montbello, family engagement efforts are fraught with distrust and misunderstanding. Although schools and school leaders may not be able to address broader patterns of contextual and structural distrust, they can focus on repairing—and developing—relational trust, especially through listening and recognizing the contextual and structural factors that impact individuals’ experiences. Indeed, this was a clear focus of DCISM.

In this chapter, I document practices of equitable trust-building at DCISM, focusing on two key parent spaces at the school: the school’s advisory board (SAB), and a more informal parent advisory group. I then turn to the school’s focus on newcomer and transnational families, conceptualizing interactions through a lens of *acompañamiento*. I argue that building relationships with immigrant families necessitates an approach that moves beyond designing engagement practices; these relationships require individual interactions or *pedagogies* that affirm and recognize their transnational identities. I particularly focus on the role played by the school’s principal, who I argue functioned as a “border broker” in helping families find a sense of belonging in the school and community.

### **Building equitable relationships of trust**

Because of the wider Montbello context, DCISM leaders recognized the importance of building trust with parents and community members, prioritizing relationships and collaboration. School efforts for engagement center these goals as faculty and staff strived to listen to parents and understand families' experiences and needs. Mr. Silva underscored the centrality of relationship-building in designing school practices, recalling:

Cuando llegué a esa escuela, el nivel de marginalización era enorme. Al grado de que los padres de familia ni siquiera sabían quién era el director o que había un proceso para contratarme a mí como director. Así que mi esfuerzo de nuestros últimos años ha sido ser visible. [When I got to this school, the level of marginalization was enormous. It was to a point where parents didn't even know who the principal was or that there was a process to hire me as a principal. So, my efforts these last few years have been to be visible] (Silva, interview, December 30, 2020).

Mr. Silva's efforts to be more visible included sending weekly videos and calls to parents, standing at the front of the parking lot each morning, and "abrirle la puerta a los padres de familia todo el día para que lleguen a la oficina para platicar por cualquier asunto [open the doors to parents all day so that they arrive at my office to talk about any issue]". Across these efforts, Mr. Silva underscored: "Así que estos años han sido para establecer una relación con ellos,[these years have been about establishing a relationship with them (parents)]" (Silva, interview, December 30, 2020). Mr. Silva identified building relationships with parents as a primary goal for the school and as an element of his everyday schedule.

It is important to note that his initial efforts to improve engagement at DCISM were not very successful. During his first year as principal, parent attendance at school activities was consistently low. Even parents, like Juana, a Central American mother, admitted the rough start

to his engagement efforts: “La primera reunión a la que yo fui a la escuela cuando empezó el año, yo pensé que me había confundido de día. Cuando yo vi que no había carros... yo me bajo con mi esposo y le digo, la reunión era hoy? [The first meeting that I attended when the year started, I thought that I had the wrong day. When I saw there were no cars...I got out of the car with my husband and I tell him, the meeting was today?] (J., interview, April 23, 2020). Like Juana noted, few parents approached the school. Slowly, many of Mr. Silva’s practices—the open school and office doors, his visibility, and his willingness to build personal relationships—all aspects of building community—have appealed to many Latin American immigrant parents. These engagement practices also provided space for Mr. Silva to begin building relationships with parents. As he and other DCISM faculty persisted in this approach to engagement, more parents began to participate in school activities. Juana explained that participation in DCISM activities increased throughout the 2019-2020 school year and that, “Aquí, con un padre más que asiste a cada reunión, es un logro. [Here, with one parent more that attends every meeting, that is an achievement.] (J., interview, April 23, 2020).

Building on my analysis in the last chapter, I argue that these forms of engagement have been successful because they better align with what families value and with their definitions of engagement. Moreover, many of the parents involved in the school have found opportunities to be engaged in decision-making. DCISM has a School Advisory Board (SAB), a version of the School Accountability Council that every Colorado school is required to have, where around six parents (including Latino and Black parents) are valued members of the decision-making team, collaborating with four teachers and four administrators as they learn about school goals and help to create initiatives. They also problem-solve together—in several cases, around the school’s renewal of their innovation status—and many parents bring their own concerns to the board,

such as questions about scholarships, graduation requirements, and concerns about bullying, remote learning, and testing<sup>14</sup>. Later in this chapter, I describe in detail how parents' concerns led to an adjustment to standardized testing dates to better fit families' schedules.

In addition to this formal decision-making group, Mr. Silva also created parent advisory meetings, held monthly and in the evening, and open to any interested parents. He intended to create a space where parents could receive more information about opportunities for their child's education like scholarships, extracurricular activities, and courses for college credit. Because of this, several administrators and teachers attended to present this information. Additionally, parents could voice their concerns and provide input as to how these concerns might be addressed. However, this informal space developed into something more collaborative. After Mr. Silva requested that I provide my opinion during a parent advisory meeting in August of 2019<sup>15</sup>—and after I suggested they create working groups—the advisory space evolved into meetings where parents could interact with each other over dinner, work together in groups on issues that matter to them, as well as listen to presentations that provide more information about opportunities for their children. For example, in one meeting held in the library, where over 40 individuals were present, parents first had dinner together and after about 30 minutes of *convivencia*, listened to Mr. Silva's presentation on the "state of affairs" of the school. Mr. Silva presented information on graduation requirements, statistics on student and teacher absences, scores on standardized tests, and reports on discipline practices. Then parents had time to split into two groups: one group worked on how to address bullying in school and the other worked on how to grow parent engagement in the school. These two topics reflected the largest concerns

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<sup>14</sup> My analysis in this section draws on my observations of these meetings, including specific fieldnotes from 10/7/2019, 1/7/2020, 2/10/2020, 3/2/2020, 4/10/2020, 9/13/2020.

<sup>15</sup> This interaction is described in Chapter 2.

that parents had surfaced in the August meeting at the beginning of the school year. These meetings continued until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and also spurred the creation of more focused parent teams, including a participatory action group that I worked with over the past two years. In Chapter 8, I describe how these meetings motivated mothers to join our PAR group in order to advocate for educational change in the broader Montbello community.

These meetings were successful in building community because of several features, including the availability of translation. All of these meetings had several translators present. The meetings were held bilingually, with Spanish being the primary language spoken. Most parents in attendance were primarily Spanish speakers. However, all parents in attendance wore headphones where the language could be switched back and forth. A translator also translated to French for about three African immigrant mothers who spoke primarily French. While translation may seem like a less significant detail, Donna Garnett, a community leader, spoke of its importance:

So that information is not really getting to either other people within the community for purposes of dialogue, nor are those opinions making their way to the administration. So, what can we do? How do we foster that? And I know for MOC (Montbello Organizing Committee) that we require every single person who participates in a meeting that everybody has to wear headsets. It is dual language justice happening at all times. The only way there's a level playing ground is when everybody is on a level playing ground. And you can't do that when only some people have the opportunity to converse freely.

(D. Garnett, interview, September 4, 2020).

For Garnett, everyone should have the opportunity to hear their first language spoken, and to have full access to the meeting; she frames this as “dual language justice.” I have observed how

parents felt the impact of this attention to language at DCISM. The school had translators present at every parent advisory meeting, parent teacher conference, open house, and other engagement efforts I attended. These translators were provided by the district, but for a fee; Mr. Silva allotted a large part of his school budget to ensure that there were translators for all events. Translators were also present at most SAB meetings. In two of the meetings, translators were not present due to snowy weather, and when the SAB meetings moved online due to Covid-19 limitations, translators were no longer available. However, in those cases, Mr. Silva translated for parents and teachers, and in the process, created space for multilingual meetings. During the online SAB meetings in 2020, he also invited the French teacher, who is from an African country, to participate and translate for the African French-speaking mother on the board. One Central American mother spoke about the importance of these efforts at SAB meetings:

Pues hubo un intérprete y el director nos daba el tiempo a cada quien, él interpretó. Entonces de alguna manera nos comunicaron en nuestro propio idioma y eso también ayuda mucho a tener la voz y el poder apoyar al comité. [Well there was an interpreter and the principal gave time to each person, he also interpreted. So, in one way or another they communicated in our own language and that helps a lot to have the voice and power to support the committee.] (L, interview, April 14, 2020)

By having a principal who knew how to support these parents and dedicated the time and effort to implement these engagement practices, parents felt more empowered to participate, again linking the importance of language in engagement practices. More than language, parents felt a sense of cultural familiarity with the principal. One interaction between Mr. Silva and a father at one of these meetings underscores this connection. As I recorded in my field notes:

The dad told him that it was his experience in other schools that he didn't feel comfortable giving his opinion, especially in front of the principal and that it was refreshing to see that here. And Mr. Silva said "Sí, le apuesto que esos directores fueron Anglo". And the dad said "Cierto, y se siente!" Mr. Silva then said that he needed them to participate and could sense they could be leaders (fieldnotes, August 6, 2019).

The design of these DCISM meetings and the attention to cultural and linguistic needs did not position parents as individuals in need of services; in contrast, they were treated as essential stakeholders who could collaborate to improve school conditions for their children—most importantly, on topics of their own choosing (fieldnotes, October 21, 2019). Ishimaru (2020) advocates for a similar approach, one that she describes as "building and enacting *equitable collaborations*," a "process that seeks to move beyond the 'good parent/bad parent' dichotomy to foster solidarities amid difference toward community-determined educational justice and well-being" (p. 4). She proposes several rules of engagement that provide "roles for nondominant parents and communities as educational leaders", "goals of systemic transformation within a culture of shared responsibility", "strategies of relationship and capacity-building for systemic change", and an "approach to *educational change* that addresses political and social issues in the broader community" (p. 36). At DCISM, these meetings provided space for a version of these *equitable collaborations* at the school, where parents were encouraged to take on leadership roles and work for change within their school and community.

All of these efforts to improve communication, outreach, relationships, and trust with parents can be understood as a form of family and community engagement. Yet, as I develop in this chapter, it wasn't just *what* the school did (its practices), it was also *how* these practices were enacted (its pedagogies). In my analysis, I believe DCISM's efforts had certain qualities that



contributed to their success. Scholars have noted the importance of engagement efforts that are culturally sustaining, especially when addressing English language learners or culturally and linguistically diverse students (Naughton & Children Now, 2004; Campos et. al, 2011; Hughes, et al, 2016; Grant & Ray, 2018). Although these studies underscore the importance of cultural and linguistic practices, I argue that these efforts do not focus on the importance of *individual interactions* between families and schools, and how those interactions are vehicles for establishing (or eroding) trust. Hong (2011) positions building relationships as a necessary factor in building trust and calls for a more *ecological conception* of engagement, one that reflects the reality that families and communities shape schools. She particularly describes how normalizing the presence of parents in classrooms can build trust, and how parent mentors—who understand parent experiences as well as school practices—can bridge the gaps between communities and school (Hong, 2011). This normalization of school practices and approach to community can encourage relationship-building. However, I argue that the *individual interactions* which lead to relationship-building cannot be systematically reproduced by school practices. As I demonstrate in this chapter, these equitable relationships of trust are developed through listening to parents’ needs—especially newcomer immigrant parents—and by letting the lessons learned from listening, guide interactions.

### **Building belonging in a newcomer school**

Much of the evidence on how trust has been built in this school is not solely based on the *type* of engagement; it is more about *how* the interactions take place. As I will develop in the next sections, these interactions are shaped by a school leader who shares experiences with many of the immigrants and sons/daughters of immigrants in this school. Through shared experiences, Mr. Silva helps to guide immigrant parents through a new, often difficult environment, and build

a space of belonging. This is especially important in a school with so many immigrant families and in a school with an international focus, features I turn to in this section.

Many of the parents at DCISM are immigrants who left their homes because of violence, dangerous conditions in their home country, a lack of employment and few economic opportunities in their hometowns. For example, Sra. Aguilar, a Mexican mother, spoke of her family's difficulties because of violence and economic distress, especially after being separated from her husband, who had previously migrated to the U.S. looking for better economic opportunities. She explained that, "era muy difícil ser madre y padre para mis hijos y estar sola. [It was difficult to be mother and father for my children and being alone,]" and that the situation in her hometown was difficult due to "el peligro [danger]". This led to a difficult and stressful life for her which contributed to her decision to follow her husband to the U.S. and "estar juntos en familia. Porque también a mis niños les afectaba al estar pues sin su papá. [be together as a family. Because it also affected my kids being without their father.]" (Aguilar, interview September 10, 2020). Sra. Aguilar was not alone in her experiences. She spoke of how the widespread economic distress in Zacatecas, her home state in Mexico, led to many separations of families. She explained that she heard accounts of entire towns populated by only women and children. She described:

Era bien difícil para ellas porque, pues imagínate! Estar solas y hacer el trabajo de un hombre en el campo y todo todavía tener que, pues estar vigilando a sus niños. Porque allá la situación económica es difícil porque no hay muchas fuentes de trabajo, entonces qué hace la gente? Se viene a cruzar la frontera a agarrar un trabajito bueno aquí. [ It was difficult for them because, well imagine! Being alone and doing the work of the man in the fields and everything and still have to, well supervise your children. Because there the

economic situation is difficult because there are not a lot of opportunities for employment, so what can people do? They cross the border to get a good job here.]

(Aguilar, interview, September 10, 2020).

Several of the mothers I interviewed and worked with had similar stories, where they migrated separately and came to Montbello to live with other family members who were already in the neighborhood. This phenomenon is widespread. As Abrego (2014) argues, such transnational family strategies are a response to international economic circumstances. In this context, many DCISM families viewed the school as a means of helping their families adapt to a new country, and as a tool for their children to learn English. For example, a Mexican mother focused on the importance of learning English to adapt to the U.S. She explained that she struggled with her kids when she recently arrived because they all didn't speak English but that, "creo que sí se adaptaron pronto y además el niño que entró al kinder, pues se adaptó rápido porque pues estaba en el programa bilingüe, [I think they did adapt quickly and in addition, my son entering kindergarten, well he adapted quickly because he was in the bilingual program.] (interview, August 20, 2020).

These bilingual programs are key for immigrant parents that want better education opportunities for their children that will allow them to be successful in the English-dominant U.S. context. DCISM has a large newcomer program that is dedicated to helping these students learn English. One Mexican mother spoke of this program's success with her daughter:

En cuestión de 3 meses mi hija salió hablando perfectamente en inglés, entendiéndolo y con su diploma. Su reconocimiento porque ella pudo. Entonces, después de eso mi hija se motivó y comenzó a tener más clases. Ahora está tomando clases avanzadas, clases de otro nivel. [In a matter of 3 months, my daughter left speaking English perfectly,

understanding it and with her diploma. My acknowledgements because she could accomplish this. So, after that, my daughter became motivated and started to take more classes. Now she is taking advanced classes, classes of another level.] (interview, September 10, 2020).

DCISM's newcomer program is appealing to many immigrant parents and its international focus enhances its appeal. DCISM's international trips, opportunities to learn various languages, and the world flags displayed on the walls display a more international awareness that other schools may not readily express. Many immigrant parents at DCISM value this multicultural environment, especially as it values their own culture. Lorena, a Central American mother explained that, "le estoy inculcando a mi hijo que no pierda los valores de sus raíces, que yo soy de [Central American country]" [I am inculcating in my son to not lose his values of his roots, that I am from [Central American country]" (L, interview, April 14, 2020). Another Central American mother, Juana, described how she attempted to keep her roots in the education of her children:

Siempre he tratado de mantener el pensum de estudios de [Central American country]... Entonces mi hija siempre recibía clases en casa para mantener el español, escritura en español, lectura en español. [I always tried to maintain the curriculum from [Central American country]...So my daughter always received classes at home to maintain her Spanish, writing in Spanish, reading in Spanish.] (J., interview, April 23, 2020).

This same mother expressed her view, in a subsequent SAB meeting, that DCISM's international focus helps her to achieve this goal, now for her son's transnational learning.

However, many staff and teachers perceived the school's international focus in somewhat different terms. In particular, some teachers emphasized the international focus as teaching

languages and traveling. For example, Ms. Davis, a white teacher also in attendance at the SAB meeting with Juana, spoke about the importance of DCISM's mission as a newcomer school. During this meeting, parents, staff, and administrators discussed the creation of a comprehensive school and DCISM's possible closure. Later, in an interview with me, Ms. Davis expressed a concern that the mother did not understand the opportunities in other schools that do not have an international focus:

But I like the international thing or whatever. And I'm going in my mind, I'm sitting there and I'm like, yeah, why can't you just infuse that then into a comprehensive high school. Like you can have the best of both worlds. And so if [our school] really had that comprehensive piece to it, I would give that parent a little more credibility when she says she just liked our school the way it is. And I'm not sure if it has anything to do with being international because maybe it's her just not knowing also that other high schools offer more languages (Davis, interview, April 2, 2020).

This comment demonstrates a disconnection between Ms. Davis' view of DCISM's international focus—as language learning—and that of parents, who stressed the role of the school as a mediating, even transnational space, where students could retain their language and culture, while also learning English and how to succeed in U.S. academic spaces. Ms. Davis saw this parent's comment as a misperception, faulting her lack of knowledge about the resources available in comprehensive schools. Her view, however, was tempered by comments from the principal and other school staff. Mr. Silva, for instance, has stated in several parent advisory meetings that DCISM is an international school because of the diversity and sharing of cultures in the school. In these meetings, he cited all of the languages and countries that his students represent. Furthermore, he routinely speaks his rudimentary—but understandable—French to

African French-speaking students and parents and has even begun to learn to speak Maya K'iche' to exchange a few quick words with indigenous Guatemalan students. Like the Central American mothers above, Mr. Silva, not only celebrates the international focus of DCISM, but also begins to capitalize on the *transnational* potential of the school, a place where immigrant students and families can draw on *all* of their experiences and tools as they integrate themselves into the school community.

Like with the engagement efforts I detailed in the previous section, the international focus of the school appeals to immigrant parents, and is also a feature that builds trust, in that it allows parents to negotiate their children's education in ways that are culturally and linguistically affirming of their previous experiences. Yet, here, I argue that what makes DCISM unique—its international focus, culturally sustaining practices, parent meetings and advisory groups—cannot be easily “packed up” and “applied” in a different context. These are not portable “practices” or “strategies” that can be operationalized and scaled-up. Indeed, the international focus of DCISM, in other hands, might be interpreted narrowly, as a focus on language learning. Likewise, some of its practices around parent engagement might be seen as mechanisms for school improvement, rather than relational spaces of collaboration. Here, I underscore the dangers of trying to *operationalize* practices and create institutionalized strategies. I pose, instead, that such practices should be understood as *pedagogies* embedded in contexts and relationships. I conceptualize the work of DCISM—and Mr. Silva in particular—as a *pedagogy of acompañamiento*. I turn to this concept in the next section.

### **Pedagogies of Acompañamiento**

I argue that building relationships and trust cannot be operationalized to create institutionalized strategies for engagement. When we think of building trust as a method, a recipe

for a generalized response to everything, then we ignore the lived experiences of people who are *feeling* the impact of distrust. Ishimaru (2020) has made a similar argument about the dangers of operationalizing parent engagement practices. She argues:

...In most schools, family engagement continues to be operationalized as parent attendance at prescribed school events...and “training” parents to ensure their children do their homework, attend school, behave in accordance with school expectations, and otherwise passively adhere to whatever policymakers and educational professionals say is best for their children (Ishimaru, 2020, p. 3).

Operationalizing engagement positions parents as a tool for academic success, potentially undermining collective goals of belonging and building relationships. The goal of operationalizing engagement models may be appealing to school leaders striving to improve their schools and build better relationships (Jiménez-Castellanos et al., 2016). Ms. Davis reflects this position when—asked about how to build trust—she pointed by referencing a school leadership approach to “school culture”: “Yeah, OK, and so my point is then like as a leader it's very difficult to do the one thing that you've just asked there. And that is how do you change culture, build culture and keep culture?” (Davis, interview, April 2, 2020). The teacher reframed the question to fit popular views of “building school culture,” that are widely discussed in school leadership (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Lucas & Valentine, 2002; Eilers & Camacho, 2007). Although I only heard this teacher frame building of trust in this way, some scholars have proposed recommendations to operationalize transformative parent engagement in predominantly Latino communities (Jiménez-Castellanos et al., 2016). Although honorable goals, such approaches sometimes emphasize trust-building as a series of steps or a set of practices, instead of focusing on humanizing interactions—such as listening and *conviviendo*—with individuals.

This operationalization reflects an institutional view of change, that although powerful, may also undermine the empathy and dignity that must be embodied when building trust and relationships. Through such approaches to engagement, school leaders may inadvertently ignore the lived experiences of parents, and their accompanying emotions and perspectives. An example may help to illustrate this contrast. This moment—from a parent advisory meeting—demonstrates the developing trust between parents and the principal. Such trust, I argue, relies on the reactions of the principal to what the parent shared. I have reconstructed this event from my extensive fieldnotes from this meeting held in August of 2019<sup>16</sup>.

As parents took turns providing ideas for DCISM parent engagement efforts, one Mexican mother nervously raised her hand and shakily said that she was undocumented and that it was harder for her to do many of the things other parents do to be more engaged in their child's education, partly because of transportation difficulties. Mr. Silva immediately thanked her for voicing her opinion and assured her that her story inspired him and the parents listening. He acknowledged it was “su realidad y estoy seguro que muchos de nosotros nos identificamos” [your reality and I am sure that many of us can relate]. Many of the parents in the room nodded and smiled at her as Mr. Silva spoke. Another parent chimed in: “¡Por supuesto! [Of course!]”. The principal then addressed her comments about undocumented: “Esta escuela tiene que tener un mensaje firme que no trabajamos con ICE y, al contrario, aceptamos y celebramos nuestros estudiantes indocumentados. [This school has to have a firm message that we don't work with ICE and, on the contrary, we accept and celebrate our undocumented students.]” Mr. Silva then criticized the institution of ICE and added: “Nosotros no vamos a participar con prácticas que vienen de una historia de discriminación, y sinceramente de practicas de una epoca

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<sup>16</sup> Drawn from fieldnotes from August 6, 2019.



colonial [We won't participate with the practices that stem from a history of discrimination, and frankly, from practices from a colonial era.]” A man exclaimed “¡Eso! ¡Eso! [Yes, that's it!]” and subsequently turned to the woman who shared and said that he had resources to help her with transportation in Montbello. Mr. Silva's first response—underscoring a common reality—opened the floor for others to support the mother and build community. His response embodied *politicized trust*, as he called out marginalizing policies and demonstrated to other parents that this was a safe space for them, one where they belonged.

Mr. Silva's identity and experiences helped him quickly understand some of the obstacles parents are facing and helped him see elements of distrust, particularly in how the Latino community feels about the district. When I asked about how he understands this distrust, he not only demonstrated his knowledge of the district's structure, but also families' ways of knowing:

Sí, el distrito históricamente—y es evidente por lo que yo he vivido—es que no tiene la conciencia total de la comunidad y eso se expresa de diferentes maneras. Una es la indiferencia. Los padres de familia no se presentan en las escuelas, no demuestran el nivel de participación que debería haber. Y eso es un síntoma de la desconfianza o probablemente la falta de atención que el distrito le aporta a la comunidad. Otra evidencia es que no solamente los padres de familia no se involucran, sino que también se ve que no existe una comunicación eficaz que el distrito tenga para comunicarse con los padres de familia. Muchas veces los padres de familia, a pesar de los sistemas que existen para comunicarse con ellos, indican que no han recibido notificaciones. Indican que no saben lo que está pasando. Indican que no saben cómo involucrarse, o que no han sido invitados a involucrarse dentro del sistema del distrito. Entonces todo eso son síntomas de marginalización que existen en alto grado. [Yes, the district historically—and it's evident

because I have lived it—does not have a complete understanding of the community and that is manifested in different ways. One is indifference. Parents don't present themselves in school, don't demonstrate the same level of participation that there should be. And that is a symptom of the distrust or probably the lack of attention that the district gives the community. Other evidence is that not only do parents not participate, but they it is also evidence that no effective mechanism for communication exists to communicate with parents. Many times, parents, despite the systems that already exists to communicate with them, indicate that they haven't received notifications. They indicate that they don't know what is happening. They indicate that they don't know how to be involved, or that they haven't been invited to be involved within the district's system. So all of these are symptoms of marginalization that exist at a high level.] (Silva, interview, December 30, 2020).

He points to parents' indifference to engagement and lack of communication—not as parents' weaknesses—but as failures of the school and district to fully invite and welcome participation. He highlights the school district's role in contributing to marginalization; his insight challenges the “lack of engagement” narrative, as he clarifies that parents are perceived as disengaged when, in reality, they are overwhelmed by these marginalizing practices. Additionally, this insight is his call to action, a call to bring parents from the margins to the center. As mentioned above, Mr. Silva dedicated his first years to building relationships and trust. His starting point for such efforts is his own experience: “por lo que yo he vivido.”

This understanding of parents—and his own relational responses—are inextricably linked to his identity as a Latino immigrant. This is yet another reason why I argue that engagement practices in his school cannot be understood solely through the lens of culturally responsive or

sustaining *practices*. It is not just about inclusive engagement, trust-building, or even rebuilding relationships. I focus instead on how individuals make human connections with each other in an educational context that has often been dehumanizing. I also have seen how these bonds deepen over time, especially for those that are distrusting of educational institutions and continue to be marginalized. Ishimaru (2020) writes about the importance of *moment-to-moment interactions* between educators and families that foster collective learning and replace “historically rooted power asymmetries with new relationships and ways of interacting to co-create change” (p. 12). This concept addresses the importance of interactions; however, it lacks a perspective that encompasses the cultural and lived experiences of an immigrant identity.

This is why I focus on a key concept from *Borderlands: acompañamiento*. According to Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020), *acompañamiento* is a “communally oriented, relationally based, and dialogical approach driven by a border gnosis and solidarity with the migrant Others, with the aim of examining collectively the unfolding forces of globalization that thrust families and migrants into a dizzying socioeconomic order that renders them expendable (p. 37). I also draw on Sepúlveda’s (2018) conceptualization of this term, in order to theorize some of the practices that educators employ to forge relationships with families, and create humanizing spaces, even amid structural constraints. In the case of DCISM, school faculty often incorporate the cultural identities of families in efforts to build trust and develop solidarity. Such acts, as Sepúlveda (2018) contends, can operate as forms of “resistance against oppression and hegemonic thinking in the form of music, stories, art, and dialogues” (p. 57). According to Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020), through *acompañamiento*, a teacher or mentor is encouraged to *acompañar*, to engage in dialogue, and share their experiences with students and families. They refer to educators who engage in these practices of *acompañamiento* as *border brokers*. They:

act from an episteme that emerges from everyday life in the borderlands—of border crossing, transnational lives in which migrant subjects learn to maneuver, make do, create new ways of being, and improvise complex cultural negotiations of oppressive, racialized bordered spaces embedded in multiple, contrasting linguistic systems and spaces, all the while searching for family, community, and dignity” (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 36-37).

This conceptualization of a border broker goes beyond efforts to improve engagement and build trust. It directly addresses the bonds between people with shared lived experiences of border crossing as they accompany each other through marginalizing experiences with schooling and in their own neighborhoods. The shared experiences of crossing borders, what Dyrness and Sepulveda (2020) refer to as “border gnosis,” is a powerful form of knowledge. Similar to Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of *border conocimiento*, this understanding allows border brokers to operate “with a different cultural logic that stemmed from their own experiences of navigating and crossing borders and from bearing the brunt from mainstream institutional gatekeepers policing those borders, be they physical/political, racial, gendered, cultural, or linguistic,” (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 48).

With this framework in mind, the various engagement practices and international focus of the DCISM emerge in sharper relief. At this school, the shared experiences and knowledge gathered from border crossings help to facilitate a sense of belonging and a community that values transnational ways of being. Here, parent engagement is a medium of belonging, an end in itself, not merely a means to academic achievement. Consequently, building trust happens when teachers and school leaders acknowledge, in deeply humanizing ways, the experiences of others. However, to achieve this, teachers and school leaders must function as *border brokers*. In the

final section of this chapter, I turn to Mr. Silva's work as a border broker. I argue that Mr. Silva attempts to rebuild trust through acts of cultural solidarity in an environment of historical distrust. I discuss how he rebuilds trust through *pedagogies of acompañamiento*. In particular, the principal's Salvadoran immigrant identity plays a key role in his ability to accompany parents—especially Latino immigrant parents—through marginalizing experiences, to a space of belonging. I first describe Mr. Silva's own immigrant experiences, and then turn to his work as a border broker for families at DCISM.

### **Mr. Silva as Border Crosser**

Mr. Silva is, of course, my father. As a result, our conversations—even our formal interviews—occurred in the context of our relationship, and our family life. When I asked my father for a final formal interview, he immediately agreed. We sat in his living room with my baby on the floor, playing with my mother, and my grandmother on the couch beside us. He was relaxed watching a soccer game. However, as I asked the first question: What is your migration story, he tensed. He asked: “¿Qué si hacemos esto? ¿Por qué no me das las preguntas y luego te escribo las respuestas? [What if we do this? What if you give me the questions and I write you the answers?]” However, I insisted that I wanted to hear how he would tell his own migration story. He paused, and gave an extremely short version of his migration story:

Bueno, diría que me vine porque mi familia se vino a Estados Unidos debido al conflicto armado que hubo en El Salvador en los años 80. Y vine a parar a Nueva York. Después nos mudamos a Louisiana donde estudié secundaria y al nivel universitario. Y luego busqué trabajo. Y trabajé en un hospital por 10 años y luego cambié al magisterio. Me hice maestro, trabajé como maestro de español y francés por 7 años. Luego me hice administrador de escuela. Y mi experiencia como inmigrante ha sido mixta, he tenido

buenas experiencias debido a mi experiencia como inmigrante. Pero también he tenido muchas negativas en el que, por el hecho de ser inmigrante, he recibido maltrato. [Well, I would say that I came because my family came to the U.S. because of the armed conflict in El Salvador during the 80s. And I ended up in New York. then I moved to Louisiana where I went to high school and to college. Then I looked for a job. I worked in a hospital for 10 years and then I changed to education. I became a teacher, I worked as a Spanish and French teacher for 7 years. Then I became a school administrator. My experience as an immigrant has been mixed, I have had good experiences due to my experience as an immigrant. But I have also had many negative ones where, because I am an immigrant, I have been mistreated.] (Silva, interview, December 30, 2020).

Telling one's migration story is not easy, especially if you know that it will be used in research. Being vulnerable about the struggles and triumphs one has experienced as an immigrant requires much trust and openness. Even with my father telling me the story, he limited himself to the basics. But his story is a necessary one to write to help others understand how a leader, with similar experiences to other border crossers, can play an essential role in transforming school spaces. He elaborated on the role his identity plays in connecting with immigrant families:

Yo creo que todos los directores lo pueden hacer y muchos lo han de estar haciendo. La diferencia entre entre yo y otros directores es que yo lo puedo decir de una manera personal y basado en experiencia personal, mientras que otros no lo pueden hacer de esa manera. Probablemente solo lo pueden hacer basado en lo que han leído, lo que han visto. Pero si uno lo ha vivido y uno sabe las dificultades que se puede encontrar en el camino, entonces uno puede identificarse más con las familias y el estudiante, y aún guiarlo mejor para que tengan la motivación de seguir adelante. [I think that all principals can do this

and many are probably doing this. The difference between me and other principals is that I can say this through a personal manner and based on personal experience, while others can't do this in the same way. Probably, they can do this based on what they have read, what they have seen, but if one has lived it and one knows the difficulties that can be found along the way, then one can identify oneself more with the families and the student, and guide them better still so that they have the motivation to keep going.]

(Silva, interview, December 30, 2020).

Knowing more about how his experiences might shape Mr. Silva's ability to be a border broker can help us see how trusting relationships might be developed between marginalized families and school leaders. Because of this, I have chosen to share more of my father's migration story, from my own knowledge.

Mr. Silva spent most of his childhood in San Salvador, El Salvador during the 1970s. He remembers his childhood as a happy time, playing soccer with friends in the street, going to school at *el Externado* where he learned to type on typewriters and learning from his teachers, Jesuit priests. He has repeatedly told me of how he would ride the bus home and would stop to buy *pupusas* on the side of the road. However, by the time the Salvadoran civil war began in 1979, he routinely witnessed violence and often heard explosions and skirmishes between the government's army and guerilla groups. He has told us about one searing day in particular, when he was walking to the bus stop after school and saw three Jesuit priests—one of them his former teacher—assassinated on the side of the road. He ran back towards the school and teachers helped him to call home to get picked up.

My dad's family saw the need to leave El Salvador urgently and unexpectedly in January of 1981 as they felt the threat of the government's death squad. They arrived in New York with

what my grandmother recalled as just one suitcase and light jackets. They struggled to make a living and find a place they could call home in New York, and eventually left for Louisiana. A fellow factory worker invited my grandmother to live with her mother in Louisiana, emphasizing that they might enjoy the warmer weather and slower-paced living. My dad's family then lived in Louisiana for around 35 years, before relocating to Colorado. He says that his experience in Louisiana may have been harder than if they had stayed in diverse New York. He explains that he did not fit in culturally and there were no other Latinos in that small Louisiana town at the time. He spent most of his high school years playing soccer and reading in the library. Most of his accounts from high school include misunderstandings and mistreatment from his mostly Black and white classmates and teachers. He was able to attend university after he obtained his U.S. residency, which my grandmother says was no easy feat. He decided to obtain citizenship, not because he was eager to be a U.S. citizen, but because he met my mother in college. She was a Salvadoran with a student visa. After my younger brothers and I were born, my mother chose to be voluntarily deported, so that she might eventually obtain legal residency in the U.S. My younger brother and I lived with my mother in El Salvador for two years, separated from my father. When I turned 5 and was about to start school, my parents decided to send me to the U.S. to live with my father, and the two of us lived apart from my mother and brother for a year. Finally, in 1997, my mother came back to the U.S. and we were able to live together once again.

These experiences of violence, separation, and mistreatment are common to many immigrants arriving in the U.S. However, my father does not see his migration story as purely negative. As he mentioned, there have been many positive experiences. He values the expanded opportunities and worldviews that his language and migration experiences have provided him, even as his lack of English created barriers to his formal academic achievement:



Ventaja sería el hecho de que yo hablaba español y entonces mi vocabulario era más extenso y conforme iba aprendiendo inglés, tenía la habilidad de poder comparar el inglés con el español y aprenderlo, hasta cierto punto, bien como suficiente para ir a la universidad. Y por otro lado, tenía un conocimiento más amplio del mundo. Tenía un aprecio por las diferentes culturas del mundo y los diferentes puntos de vista, en lugar de solo uno. Y eso es una gran diferencia. [Advantages would be the fact that I spoke Spanish, so my vocabulary was more extensive and while I was learning English, I had the ability to compare English with Spanish and learn it, to a certain extent, well enough to go to college. On the other hand, I had a more ample knowledge of the world. I had an appreciation for different world cultures and different points of view, instead of just one. And that is a big difference.] (Silva, interview, December 30, 2020).

This ability to perceive his challenges as opportunities for growth, and his ability to quickly adapt to new situations and environments is a characteristic of border brokers (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020; Sepúlveda, 2018). Border brokers are powerful because they can see the potential for transformation in bleak situations. Where others see weaknesses and trauma, border brokers often see strength, resilience, and a possibility for change.

Here, I observed how Mr. Silva often challenges narratives that others perceive as solely negative. For example, when I mentioned that I heard many parents prioritize learning English for the success of their child in school, Mr. Silva challenged that notion, noting that it was possible for parents to value both Spanish and English languages:

Yo no estoy de acuerdo con que los padres de familia no valoren el español. Es más, es mixto. Hay quienes quieren que los hijos sigan aprendiendo español en la escuela y que utilicen literatura y que utilicen recursos de origen latinoamericano para enseñar el

material que se enseñan en las escuelas. Y hay padres de familia que quisieran tener como un sistema bilingüe. Mientras que hay otros que se enfocan más en el inglés y hablan inglés en el hogar, un gran número de los padres de familia hablan español en la casa. Ellos quieren preservar esa cultura. Y entonces yo lo que les digo a los padres de familia es que hay que valorar el conocimiento y la cultura que uno tiene para construir sobre ella y ampliar el conocimiento del estudiante y darles ventajas para que cuando salgan de high school puedan tener más oportunidades para becas, para entradas a universidades debido a su amplio conocimiento en dos lenguas. Porque ser bilingüe en este país da más dinero, da más oportunidades, y da mejor manera de servir a una comunidad que ya es diversa. Entonces yo lo que les digo a los padres de familia es que valoren el español, su identidad y lo utilicen como una plataforma para poder impulsar al estudiante a que tengan la motivación de seguir adelante. [I do not agree that parents don't value Spanish. For that matter, it's mixed. There are those that want their children to continue to learn Spanish in school and that use Latin American based literature and resources to teach the material that is taught in schools. And there are parents that would like to have a bilingual system. While there are others that focus more on English and speak English at home, a large number of parents speak Spanish at home. They want to preserve that culture. So what I tell parents is that they must value that knowledge and culture and use it as a foundation to widen the students' knowledge and provide advantages so that when they leave high school, they may have more opportunities for scholarships, for entry into universities because of their wide knowledge in two languages. Because being bilingual in this country provides more money, more opportunities, *and* a better way to serve an already diverse community. So I tell parents

that they should value Spanish, their identity, and that they should use it as a platform to impulse the student to have more motivation to keep going.] (Silva, interview, December 30, 2020).

Although he states popular benefits of being bilingual, he also stresses the importance of serving a diverse community and challenges mainstream deficit notions of English language learners (Bunch, 2013; Garcia, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017b). His identity as a border broker allows him to view language barriers as a possibility of adaptation, success, and of giving back to the community. His identity as a leader is essential here. Through his position, he has influence to shape the norms and environment for families at DCISM. Despite many obstacles, Mr. Silva makes the conscious decision to use his power in ways that enact *pedagogies of acompañamiento*. In the following section, I turn to these interactions. I describe how Mr. Silva uses his identity as a border broker to engage in *acompañamiento*, where he provides the space for belonging in an otherwise closed and cold school system for many immigrants.

### **The Principal as Border Broker: Pedagogies of Acompañamiento**

At the beginning of the school year, in a Back-to-School event, I heard Mr. Silva talking animatedly to a student. As I walked closer, I saw him with a computer in hand, talking to a teenage boy dressed in a baggy red shirt. Mr. Silva said “¿Fuiste a El Salvador? [Did you go to El Salvador?]” The boy said “No este año, ojalá que el próximo año [Not this year, hopefully next year.]” Mr. Silva said, “¡Vamos! ¡Vamos a comer pupusas! ¡Vamos a Playa Costa del Sol! [Let’s go! Let’s go eat pupusas! Let’s go to the beach Costa del Sol!]” (fieldnotes, August 1, 2019).

Mr. Silva’s identity as a Central American immigrant connects him to many of the students and parents at the school. Like many of his students, his first experiences in the U.S.

were in middle school, where he was a young teenager, who spoke no English, and had fled violence and an oppressive regime. In his case, his family fled the civil war in El Salvador. Like many of his students, learning to navigate American society and culture was difficult and sometimes dehumanizing. The scene I described above is just one small example of how his identity as an immigrant allowed him to connect with immigrant students and parents in ways that certain white and non-immigrant faculty would not be able to do. Drawing on the concept of *acompañamiento*, I argue that the principal's experiences as a Latino immigrant allowed him to forge strong relationships with Latino parents and build a humanizing space for them to participate in meaningful ways in school activities and decision-making. In his analysis of 'Bosque High,' a California high school, Sepúlveda (2018) describes *acompañamiento* as the "organic emergence of a communal, dialogical, pedagogical, and cultural practice of making space at Bosque High to engage migrant youth in a different manner and address their most pressing existential concerns related to belonging, identity, community, and learning" (p. 57). I apply this concept to Mr. Silva's work at DCISM, describing how, as a *border broker*, he rebuilds trust with parents and engages in *pedagogies of acompañamiento*, through both everyday interactions, and in formal spaces such as decision-making committees.

### ***Acompañamiento for Belonging***

Throughout my time participating and observing engagement events at the school, I witnessed multiple acts of cultural solidarity with parents and students, especially in interactions between the principal and Latino immigrant parents. These acts of *acompañamiento* can be seemingly small moments. Some examples include speaking Spanish openly and unashamedly in large school gatherings and events. Mr. Silva routinely started meetings in Spanish, even when many others in the room only spoke English. With parents, he spoke Spanish in environments

where others were only speaking English. This allowed parents and extended family members to feel at ease, where otherwise they would feel alienated. I recalled one example in my fieldnotes:

Victoria [a Mexican mother] came up and said goodbye to [a teacher] and said that her parents were so happy that they came to the picnic and that they were nervous because they didn't speak English. And [the teacher] said that she knew that they would be comfortable here. And Victoria said, yes they really were, especially after they met Mr. Silva (fieldnotes, August 9, 2019)

These small acts included conversations he regularly engaged in with students and parents. In another interaction documented in my fieldnotes, Salvadoran students playfully quizzed Mr. Silva about whether he really knew about El Salvador:

And they told him, “Usted no sabe [You don't know]” and Mr. Silva replied, “Sí sé. Yo conozco todo El Salvador. [I do know. I know all of El Salvador.]” Mr. Silva asked where they were from and they gave a location and Mr. Silva said, “Oh, cerca de Ilopango. [Oh, close to Ilopango.]” And the boys exclaimed, “¡Sí, ahí! [Yes, there!]” And they looked at each other impressed (fieldnotes, August 1, 2019).

These seemingly small acts served to challenge the status quo at the school—and in a country—that positioned English as the authoritative language. These small interactions allowed for space for Latino immigrants to be seen and to feel valued.

Such experiences stand in contrast to traditional parent engagement approaches, where Latino immigrant parents are typically marginalized through school-centric practices that prioritize white, middle to upper class forms of participation (Valencia & Solórzano, 2004; Erickson, 1987; Baird, 2015; Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016). Through *acompañamiento*, a “cultural practice of solidarity, of relationship and community building, of claiming space and

bearing witness in an unjust, dehumanizing, and fragmented world,” Mr. Silva was able to challenge typical engagement and create a space of belonging for Latino parents (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 58). Mr. Silva acted as a border broker where, in seeking to make space for those traditionally marginalized, he addressed issues of “belonging in the margins, their identities as border crossers, racial discrimination, and cultural displacement, as well as the ever-pressing search for a new home and place in the world” (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 48). These acts of *acompañamiento* by border brokers can provide respite for students and parents that lead fragmented lives in schools that typically only view their cultures and language as something to overcome. Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) develop this point in more detail, writing:

To be Mexican in a U.S. school was to be seen as a problem in need of fixing, a member of the “needy” populations whose language and cultural ways had to be excised or corrected before they could be included. These realities are not just historical legacies from another era but active ideologies that continue to have currency in many U.S. institutions and policies (p. 42).

Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) emphasize that these ideologies are part of evolving historical and colonial narratives. In such ideologies, schools are extensions of the colonial state and aim to assimilate students into appropriate forms of belonging and citizenship in the U.S. In the face of such ideologies, border brokers can act to guide students and families through this harmful system, creating spaces that affirm—rather than degrade—their humanity. Additionally, in these collective safe spaces, students, families, and border brokers have the potential to draw on their transnational tools and their “intimate connections to multiple places” to “deepen their perspectives on and their yearning for democratic citizenship” (Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2019, p. 10). In his role as principal, Mr. Silva also had some influence to shape school practices in ways

that affirmed transnational identities. In the next section, I describe how Mr. Silva went beyond small acts of accompaniment to guide parents through complex and marginalizing schooling practices.

### ***Acompañamiento: Navigating and Transforming Belonging***

The concept of *acompañamiento* also speaks to how an educator can mediate a school space—its practices and policies—in ways that help others better navigate that space. One example of how the principal’s identity allowed him to guide parents occurred in a parent advisory meeting at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. The school leadership team—including the principal—had decided to abandon uniforms for the new school year and many Latino immigrant parents were unhappy with the decision. In this reconstruction from my fieldnotes<sup>17</sup>, I demonstrate how easily Mr. Silva is able to guide parents through an American understanding of uniforms, and some of the dynamics of the school system, when a Mexican mother asks why he took away the uniforms. Mr. Silva explained that the year before, administrators sent kids home for uniform infractions with the expectation that students would change to better follow the dress code and return to class. However, many students would not return to school. Mr. Silva shared his realization that, because of the school and community environment, fighting for the continuation of this dress code policy was unreasonable. He explained: “Si estamos perdiendo esta batalla, mejor nos enfocamos en las que podemos ganar. [If we are losing this battle, it would be better to focus on battles we can win.]” Mr. Silva then described the environment in which he grew up and his experiences in a Salvadoran school, “donde yo iba a la escuela uniformadito [where I went to school suited up in a uniform].” As he stated this, he made a gesture with his hands as if he was pulling down on a coat jacket and stood

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<sup>17</sup> Drawn from fieldnotes from August 6, 2019.

up very straight. He said, “Era otra epoca, [It was another time]”. Several parents nodded in agreement. Mr. Silva returned to the current school context and shared that administrators conducted a survey for students and found that students were, “casi unánime en contra de los uniformes, [almost unanimous against uniforms].” He asked, how could he go against the students if it was almost unanimous? Mr. Silva finally assured the parents that there was no problem with students *not* wearing uniforms; conversely, he understood that sending students home over their uniforms would be an obstacle to their education.

In this interaction, Mr. Silva referred to his background as an immigrant when he recalled his experience as a student in Latin America and the values of education there. Uniforms were valued parts of a structured education and—as he learned that this was not as valued in DCISM’s context—he learned to adapt. The values and concept of education of the principal and many Latino parents include a culturally different idea of what education traditionally means in the U.S. Of course, the context of the United States is important to think about when implementing school practices because of the racialized practices schools use with minoritized students (Noguera, 2003). However, it is also important to contextualize the values that many Latino immigrant families bring with them into this new environment. Many parents appreciate the emphasis on behavior, on dress code, etc. This reminds them of the environment they have left behind, and highlights some of the more explicitly moral purposes of education in their former countries (Villenas, 2001). In this conversation, Mr. Silva guided and accompanied the parents in navigating this unfamiliar context. Immediately after his remarks, Sra. Aguilar, a Mexican mother, demonstrated appreciation for this form of guidance for the parents and students and added, “Yo estaba un poquito en desacuerdo con esa decisión [I disagreed a little with that decision],” and explained that she wanted her daughter to continue using a uniform. However,



she trusted the principal's decision because, "así como el director se abre a los padres, también se abre a los muchachos y a los maestros, [just like the principal opens up to the parents, he also opens up to the youth and to the teachers.]" She explained that her attitude towards the decision changed when she saw her daughter and her friends say "¡Ganamos! ¡Sí nos apoyó! [*We won! He did support us!*]" Sra. Aguilar, surprised, saw her daughter's reaction and realized that her daughter and her friends "sintieron que ganaron algo con el director, [felt like they won something with the principal]" (fieldnotes, August 6, 2019).

In this interaction, Sra. Aguilar demonstrated that she understood that this decision was something that her own child wanted, even if she and other parents still wanted uniforms. Here, the parents had a concrete example of how much the principal could relate to their educational values; however, they also understood why this had to change in this new "American" context. I contend that Mr. Silva's leadership in listening to the students, as well as being able to use his own cultural identity and past immigrant experiences to guide parents through this system, was a form of *acompañamiento*. As parents negotiated global and transnational borderlands in their seeking a quality education, Mr. Silva's *acompañamiento* was a cultural practice of solidarity, foregrounding how both he and parents had to adapt to their new environment. He engaged in what Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) refer to as "complex cultural negotiations of oppressive, racialized bordered spaces" (p. 36). Through such negotiations border brokers both navigate and accompany others through that same fragmented space (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020).

In the interaction above, Mr. Silva helped parents understand the school's rationale for not requiring uniforms. There were other times where he adapted the environment of the school

around parents' needs and ideas. One of these cases focused on the dates for assessments, where Mr. Silva listened to and acted upon suggestions from parents on the School Advisory Board<sup>18</sup>.

Ms. Danvers, an assistant principal, introduced the topic, noting that she wanted to ensure that parents understood the importance of standardized state testing and college entrance exams for the school's evaluation of academic achievement. Ms. Paez, a Mexican mother, who worked in the school cafeteria and had a child at the school, said she agreed because many parents leave for spring break and celebrate *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), a Catholic holiday. She explained that she always saw low lunch counts—which meant many student absences—during that time of the year. Intently listening, Mr. Silva put the dates for testing back on the television screen. Then, Juana, a Central American mother, asked if those dates could change. She explained that since the test dates were so close to spring break, she didn't want to see students miss out on taking the SAT. As she looked at a calendar on her phone, she said, “Es justo cuando nuestra comunidad Latina celebra el feriado en estas fechas en nuestros países. Coincide con (las fechas de los exámenes) [It's precisely the Latino community that celebrates the holiday during those dates in our countries. They coincide with the testing dates]”. Ms. Paez added, “Les dije. Viernes Santo es esa semana. [I told you. Holy Friday is that week.]” Then, Mr. Silva translated those comments to the teachers present at the meeting, and concluded his translation: “Let's look at the dates then.” Abruptly, directing her gaze at the teachers, Juana said, “No es que uno sea religioso, pero es esa época de feriado y la gente se reúne en familia. [It's not that I am religious, but that time is a holiday and people gather as a family.]” Mr. Silva related, joking a little, and replied, “Sí, y se va a la playa a disfrutar... [Yes, and one goes to the beach to have fun...]” Ms. Paez's daughter, who was sitting at the table—although not actively participating in the

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<sup>18</sup> Reconstructed from fieldnotes from March 2, 2020.

meeting—laughed and told Mr. Silva, “¡Ya está pensando en lo que va a hacer durante el break! [You’re already thinking about what you’re going to do during break!]” Mr. Silva smiled at her. The teachers seemed lost at this turn of the conversation and one teacher asked if this problem with the testing dates occurred last year. Mr. Silva explained that the dates always change since the dates for Semana Santa are based on the lunar calendar. The teacher responded with an: “oh,” and the rest of the teachers nodded. Mr. Silva returned to the deliberation on when to move the dates and agreed that this conflict was a factor that outweighed others on which they based their testing date decisions. Finally, the group of parents and teachers decided to move the start of testing to April 14th. The teachers then asked several questions about how to make changes to their lessons with this change in schedule. So that the teachers would understand, Ms. Paez said in English, “There is more homework to do...good homework.” And then in Spanish and English to Mr. Silva, she said, “Por eso es bueno que hablen con papás antes de tomar decisiones, for more input. [That is why it’s good for you to talk to parents, for more input.]” Juana added, “Créanme que en otra escuela ni toman en cuenta nuestra opinión. Pero en esta escuela, como hay tantas familias Latinas, se toma más en cuenta. [Believe me that in another school, they wouldn’t even take our opinion into consideration. But in this school, since there are so many Latino families, our opinion is more heard.]”

In this example, Mr. Silva uses his influence as school leader to move the testing schedule for the whole school, in order to accommodate the Latino community’s customs and traditions. He not only listened to the parents; because of his actions in moving the dates, he demonstrated that he took their contributions seriously. Moreover, he *understood* what the parents were concerned about, as he knew about and had participated in those same customs. He also—like a border broker—shared in the knowledge of Semana Santa customs with other Latino

parents *and* helped to explain these customs to other teachers who could not directly relate to these concerns. Mr. Silva's actions opened the space for parents to advocate for their own community and children, as well as the well-being of the school since they knew that this testing was important for the school itself. Instead of marginalizing immigrants' values, customs, and experiences, Mr. Silva provided space for their school to respect the parents' needs and shaped school practices in ways that allowed for parents' belonging in the school, *as well as* more opportunities for student achievement. As evidenced by Juana's comments, the parents demonstrated gratitude for being listened to and having such an impact on school decisions. This act of *acompañamiento* also served to position parents as equitable partners and as valued members of the school community.

Mr. Silva's ability to guide, share, and transform spaces is key in developing a space of belonging for parents. However, his identity also has drawbacks in a community that already faces fragmentation. As described previously, Montbello faces racialized divisions that prevent many community members from feeling a unified sense of community identity. This sense of identity is important to—but also contested within—the district's recent plan to return to one, unified comprehensive school. These racialized divisions also impact the ways in which Mr. Silva can accompany those that may not share the same language or culture. In the next chapter, I turn to these challenges, describing how *acompañamiento*, while powerful for many families, may also be perceived to be a divisive factor in school-family relationships in this already fragmented community.

## Chapter VII:

### **Searching for Cross-Cultural Solidarity: The Potential for Pedagogies of Acompañamiento**

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, *pedagogies of acompañamiento* motivate and empower parents to be engaged as they and Mr. Silva create a space that reframes who belongs. However, in a community so fragmented, especially by racialized divisions, I have found that these pedagogies of acompañamiento may be perceived as exacerbating divisions. Because of the structures and policies in place that shape interactions in Montbello, the same pedagogies of acompañamiento that empower one community can alienate another, thus limiting the possibilities for cross-racial solidarity. In this sense, the identity of the principal—a clear advantage in forging relationships with Latino parents—can also be a drawback in building relationships with African American parents.

I explore the tensions of *acompañamiento* in this chapter. I first document some of the challenges faced by Mr. Silva and how *pedagogies of acompañamiento* can be divisive, complicating how parents experience a sense of belonging in the school community. While challenging, I argue that a wider view of border-crossing experiences—and shared struggles—can be a vehicle for developing belonging and solidarity. Pedagogies of acompañamiento may be used to build this solidarity, especially through assembling a broader team of “border brokers,” who might trace connections across students and families. To do so, I argue that leaders should avoid calls to *institutionalize* pedagogies of acompañamiento, and instead support the ongoing work of border brokers. Here, as Ventura (2020) argues, schools must engage in “radical structural changes to support the nourishment work that already exists and expand that work to one that is collective and taken on by all school staff” (p. 662).

#### **Acompañamiento as Potentially Divisive**

On a snowy January evening in 2019, I sat with Mr. Silva in his living room to record our first interview, which focused on his approach to parent and community engagement. As we concluded, I asked him if there was anything else he thought he should mention. He responded by naming a challenge he had faced:

Mr. Silva: Algo que no me preguntaste que quizás sería bueno que me preguntaras sería, cuál es el grupo menos involucrado y cuál es el más retador de todas las clases que hay. Y quizás es la Afroamericana porque es una comunidad que es la más desconectada con la escuela y que tienden a no confiar en los educadores y que han tenido una perspectiva negativa de las escuelas por falta de confianza o por falta de apoyo. Y que esta comunidad es la más difícil de alcanzar y de crear confianza entonces, se tiene que tratar diferente. [Something that would have been good to ask is which group is less involved and which is the most challenging of all classes. Maybe it's the African-American group because it's a community that is the most disconnected with the school and the group tends to not trust educators and they have had a negative perspective with schools because of lack of trust or lack of support. And this community is the most difficult to reach and create trust with, so they have to be treated differently.]

AC: ¿Como? [How?]

Mr. Silva: Con las personas correctas, con diferentes tipos de campaña, con diferentes medios, por medio de líderes comunitarios que tengan la capacidad de poder enlazar la comunidad con la escuela. [With the correct persons, with different school campaigns, with different methods, through community leaders that have the capacity to link the community with the school.] (Silva, interview, January 27, 2019).

In this interaction, Mr. Silva noted the palpable distrust present in Montbello schools, particularly with African American parents at DCISM. The principal's identity as a Central American immigrant allows him to relate more easily with the majority of parents in Montbello and his school: Latin American immigrants. However, he also shared how he was trying to reach out to the African American community with the "correct persons," targeted "campaigns," and community leaders that already are connectors in the community. Mr. Silva's response details some of the ways he carefully treaded racialized divisions in the school and community.

These racialized divisions shape how educational stakeholders approach rebuilding trust and framing schools as sites of belonging. Even though Mr. Silva's identity as a Latino immigrant was the catalyst for his bonds with many Latin American immigrants, his identity is a hindrance in creating those same bonds with African American parents and community members. Not being able to share the culture of the African American community led to perceived divisions. Ms. Gray, an African American DCISM administrator who worked with Mr. Silva at DCISM until the end of the 2019-2020 school year, explained these divisions:

I had mentioned to Mr. Silva that I have spoken with Black parents and they feel they have a relationship with me, but they don't feel like they have a relationship with him. I told Mr. Silva that the perception is that he's only the principal for the Latinx families and not for the Black families. And of course I'm gonna try and help bridge that, but I think they want to feel, they want to be more connected with him. (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020).

Ms. Gray's statement lays bare Mr. Silva's lack of connection with African American families. Mr. Silva concurred about some of these challenges. He specifically noted one specific, early instance where he attempted to reach out to African American community leaders, but failed to

do so. This meeting happened in the first few weeks of his administration at DCISM. He felt the meeting turned sour when the community leaders accused him of not doing enough to help the African American community. He felt confused by this claim, given that he had only been in his role for a few weeks, and was indeed meeting with community leaders (fieldnotes, November 18, 2019). Clearly, Mr. Silva was entering into a longer history of distrust, between the school and this community. This distrust has also been magnified by advice from district officials; Mr. Silva disclosed how one district official told him to stay away from one African American community leader because “she was toxic” (fieldnotes, November 8, 2019).

Another possible barrier for creating bonds with African American families might have been the culturally specific ways in which Mr. Silva forges connections with particular students, families and community members. Mr. Silva’s cultural connection with Latino families are perceived as alienating towards others, a point Ms. Gray raises:

Ms. Gray: I'm just going to say I think that that's something that's important. You know to connect with those families.

A: How do you think that he could do that?

Ms. Gray: I think just being culturally aware. Oh...that a lot of the Black kids, they don't know what *pan dulce* is. They may not even know what *frijoles* is. Remember who your audience is. So, when speaking, to be able to reference some of those cultural things outside of the Latinx communities. Just be able to speak to different...you know. (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020).

In the previous chapter, I detailed how Mr. Silva leveraged his own experiences to build a welcoming and communal space for newcomer families. Yet, these practices—his pedagogies of *acompañamiento*—can be perceived as an obstacle to building a welcoming and communal space



with African American students and families. Ms. Davis, a white teacher at DCISM, underscored these challenges, sharing that she hears from Black students that they sometimes feel left out: “a lot of their complaints is about how they feel like the Latino celebrations, or whatever it is, are celebrated way more at our school and that they feel like there's inequity there” (Davis, interview, April 2, 2020). Part of what makes DCISM such a powerful and welcoming space for some families—including events that publicly celebrate particular cultural groups—can also exacerbate racialized divisions in the school.

These divisions are not new, nor are they limited to DCISM. Indeed, African American students and parents have experienced a sense of alienation in Montbello schools for a while, in part because of demographic changes in the neighborhood, but also due to marketized reforms that have prioritized creating new, smaller schools of choice. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Ms. Thompson, an African American mother at DCISM, described a loss of attention, and a sense of “alienation” when schools began “catering” to Latino students and their linguistic needs (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020). This sense of alienation is compounded by a historic pattern of neglect of the needs of Black students and families in the Denver Public Schools. In 2019, the DPS Board of Education passed a “Black Student Excellence Resolution” that specifically aimed to address Black students’ needs in schools. This resolution noted the wide disparities Black students face in DPS and responded to an earlier report documenting inequities in discipline, academics, and educational supports (Denver Public Schools, 2019; Asmar, 2019a). In this larger context, the culturally-sustaining practices at DCISM—while powerful and necessary for newcomer families—may alienate others.

Moreover, this perception of “catering” to one group while alienating another is influenced by the context of distrust in the neighborhood. As I have noted in previous chapters,

the last twenty years have brought many demographic changes to Montbello: an influx of Latin American immigration, as well as recent gentrification pressures. These changes have, in some cases, led long-time African-American residents to feel as if their community is disappearing. In this context, when African American parents see schools focusing on the needs of emerging bilingual students, while still not adequately meeting the needs of their children, they may perceive access to educational resources as a competition. Ms. Danvers, a white administrator at DCISM, points to how tensions can be exacerbated by the allocation of scarce resources:

And I don't know that the tensions exist so much that there's tension between those two groups, as it is there's some very finite resources in the FNE and what it becomes is that the pie is too small. And we're trying to feed everyone from too small a pie. (Danvers, interview, April 16, 2020).

District policies have exacerbated this sense of competition. In particular, co-location policies—where different schools and students share a building space, can create competition for resources, what community activist Brandon Pryor describes as two schools, “scrambling for the same thing” (B. Pryor, interview, August 28, 2020). Here, I argue that practices that build on cultural resources—such as pedagogies of *acompañamiento*—can deepen already existing tensions in place due to district policies, demographic change and historic marginalization.

How might school leaders and teachers respond to these large and historic challenges? School leaders like Ms. Gray underscore the necessity of addressing those divisions and provide a cautionary note to pedagogies of *acompañamiento*. This might be particularly the case for DCISM, which serves an incredibly diverse group of students and families. Sra. Aguilar, a Mexican mother, mentioned this challenge when I asked her about what her ideal relationship between the school and community would be:

Hijole, pues es que la verdad es que como la comunidad es muy diversa, es un reto muy grande porque...Pues como ya te habrás dado cuenta, ahí en la escuela llegan muchos recién llegados de todo el mundo. Entonces, pues cada persona tiene sus modos diferentes. Para atinarle a todos está un poco difícil. [Oh my gosh, the truth is that since the community is so diverse, it's a huge challenge because...well you will have already seen that in the school there are many newcomers from all over the world. So, every person has their own way of doing things. To achieve this with everyone is a little difficult.] (Aguilar, interview, September 10, 2020).

Teachers and leaders at DCISM echoed these challenges, although they had occasionally conflicting views about how the school should respond to them. Although all eleven DCISM administrators and faculty I interviewed stressed the importance of building relationships and connections with families, some doubted that focusing on race, language and culture was the appropriate approach. For instance, Ms. Gray, who previously noted how certain practices might alienate African American parents, highlighted another aspect of this challenge:

Like Latinx parents shouldn't just go through Mr. Silva. I think we all need to expand our thinking. I'm an AP (assistant principal) for all of our kids. Mr. Silva is the principal for all of our kids. Ms. Edison is an AP for all of our kids. That we need to be able to establish that culture, so it doesn't just go through one person. That's a lot of pressure, yeah, I mean, because our kids are about, what, 97% Latinx? That's a lot of pressure on Mr. Silva, so everything that has to do with Latinx should come through Mr. Silva? No, we all need to be culturally aware, so that's it not just him (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020).

Ms. Gray stressed the need for all staff members to be “culturally aware” and responsible for cultivating relationships with the school’s family. However, she does not acknowledge the challenges that some school staff—especially those who are not bilingual, and do not have shared immigrant experiences—may face in connecting with the school’s many immigrant families, as well as the unique vantage points of other “border brokers” at the school.

Other teachers also worried about how the school defaulted to certain messengers to interface with different families. Ms. Lopez, a Latina teacher at DCISM, was skeptical of the school’s reliance on culturally-specific relationships with families, sharing:

So, I have noticed that being in a leadership meeting, where we've talked about certain students and they're having problems. And if it's one of our African American students, I have witnessed Mr. Silva, saying: okay, Ms. Gray you can handle that one. And it's like, you know, just because they're African American doesn't mean she needs to do it. Like I can do it. You can do it, anyone can do it. And the families are not the problem, it's the connection. I think that he thinks maybe only the African American students connect better with African American leaders, but I don't think that's true” (Lopez, interview, April 2, 2020).

Ms. Lopez alludes to the segregating potential of these communication practices, advocating instead for cross-cultural and cross-racial relationship-building with families. As she argued, “It's not about race, it's about can you be a professional and can you professionally talk to a parent?” (Lopez, interview, April 2, 2020). Ms. Lopez and Ms. Gray raise an important concern. But I argue that this concern may misconstrue some of what makes culturally-focused communication practices so meaningful for families. Culture and language play an essential role in building trust, especially when communicating with families around issues of school discipline. This is perhaps

even more the case with African American families, as school discipline has been shaped by harsh, punitive and racist practices that have contributed to distrust with schools (Bell, 2020). Here, shared connections around culture, language and race can help build bonds with families. The racial identities of teachers can—in many ways—shape how teachers interact with students and families (McIntyre, 1997). The sense of “professionalism” highlighted by Ms. Lopez can also be a barrier in establishing close and sustaining relationships with families.

Conversely, Latin American immigrant parents appreciate the bonds created through shared experiences and identities. Sharing a language is an important piece in building trust. Teresa, a Mexican mother said, “Pues prácticamente sí, me siento...desde que entró su papá—no porque sea su papá—pero creo que se siente uno más comfortable cuando habla en tu idioma. [Well practically, I feel...since your father became principal—not because he’s your father—but I think that one feels more comfortable speaking in your language” (T., interview, August 20, 2020). Mr. Denis, an immigrant administrator at DCISM, also pinpointed language as a central part of trust-building: “You know you value your heritage. And the most important part of your heritage is oftentimes your language. Because you dream in that language. You fight that language. You create your world in that language” (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).

Shared language plays an essential role in the work of border brokers. Ms. Danvers, a white DCISM administrator, underscored the important role played by teachers and leaders who share the same language and understand the immigrant experience on a personal level:

For example, for a parent who has just come to the U.S. and does not speak English—to have someone that they can come to and not have to struggle to figure out how to say the deeply personal things sometimes you have to say to a school. And have to also be thinking about “how do I say all those things?” Or I’m saying them through a third

person instead of saying them to you directly. So that is critical and it is a need. (Danvers, interview, April 16, 2020).

Ms. Danvers alludes to the powerful role of language—and shared experience—in allowing border brokers to accompany, to walk *with* someone who has gone through similar harrowing experiences (Ventura, 2020). But Ms. Danvers framed this work as a first step in connecting families with a broader network of teachers and school staff. She continued, “But I think that the bridge has to happen that those folks who build those initial relationships then reach out and help become that entree, or sort of that, first welcoming face to many welcoming faces” (Danvers, interview, April 16, 2020). For Ms. Danvers, building trust through language, culture, and shared experiences is just the first step towards a sense of belonging in the school. She stressed that all individuals should be able to build relationships with all families and that these cultural connections are “entrees” to help families feel welcome in other, perhaps more formal, school spaces. These broader networks can mitigate against the risks of parents depending on one connection at the school. As she cautioned:

But I think that, if you are, particularly for like the African American parents at DCIS, it is only about 12% of the population at DCIS. So, if you think about how to create that sense of community and culture and having somebody that you feel like does have that connection. Now I think that beyond that...you want parents and students to have someone that they can connect with. I think the only danger in that is it becomes—this is your *only* person you contact. Or this is the only person you interact with. Then it can create that idea of we are really siloed (Danvers, interview, April 16, 2020).

Ms. Melendez, a Latina social worker at DCISM, also emphasized that drawing on linguistic and cultural connections is an important first step, but may not be the full answer:

At the beginning, I think it's important that somebody reaches out to them. Somebody that is more understanding, I guess, of their culture. But then it shouldn't end there. Like, Ms. Gray [an African American administrator] or you know, if it's the opposite, Mr. Silva should be involving other people with these parents so that a relationship can be built (Melendez, interview, April 3, 2020).

For Ms. Melendez, someone who understands parents' culture plays an essential role in building trust with a family. But, echoing Ms. Danvers, she calls for those border brokers to help families build a wider set of relationships across cultures. Later in our conversation, Ms. Danvers framed this work as a "bridge" to a wider sense of belonging. She shared: "So I'm thinking it goes both ways and being able to have that welcoming face for a parent of somebody they can relate to or feel they relate to them. And then that person does serve as that bridge to, who are those other relationships" (Danvers, interview, April 16, 2020). This, however, can be more challenging and time-consuming. Mr. Denis, a Black South African immigrant administrator, explained that building cross-cultural relationships is harder, leading schools to "default" to easier alternatives:

And I think in education there's so much pressure. There's always things coming at us that it's easy to default to the easiest thing. So Black people speak to the Black parents. Spanish speaking administrators and staff members speak to Spanish speaking parents. And I just think that's easier, but not really effective in building cross cultural connections. Which are there (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).

It is interesting that Mr. Denis ends by highlighting the cross-cultural connections that are already present. Yet, as he notes, forging those connections can take more time and patience, both of which are in short supply in a busy high school. But he argues that there *is* a foundation for building broader and cross-cultural connections. Later, I demonstrate how border brokers—

like Mr. Denis—have a unique role to play in naming and facilitating these possible connections.

Yet, forging cross-cultural relationships is not easy. Scholars like Ladson-Billings (1995) and Alim and Paris (2017) have argued for the necessity of culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies, in order to recognize the longstanding cultural practices of communities of color as strengths, and as essential to learning. However, Alim and Paris (2017) also argue that these asset-based pedagogies have been taken up in ways that fall short of these aims, especially if these pedagogies do not call for more fundamental shifts in power. Even in DCISM, administrators may end up focusing on superficial forms of “sharing culture” in their eagerness to build multicultural spaces. Even in her critique of how cultural identity was leveraged to build trust, Ms. Gray still advocated for a “representation of cultures” in the school:

It can be something basic, that literally needs to be represented on the walls of that school. Because if you walk in there, I think it's actually culturally blind in a sense. Because we have what it is, what DCIS Montbello is. But honestly, when you walk into school, do you really see anything representing Latinx, African American community, Marshallese communities? I don't see anything that represents the community. It's culturally blind in my opinion. Other than “OK. We're DCIS” (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020).

Here, Ms. Gray highlighted the importance of the school doing more to signal a sense of welcome to many different cultural groups. Although adding art to walls can certainly help welcome families and students, this suggestion reinforces a superficial understanding of “culture,” where cultural awareness can be represented symbolically, instead of through a more dynamic *engagement* in cultural practices. Culture, as scholars have reminded us, is neither a



trait nor a symbol, but a lived, dynamic, dialectical, and socially constructed practice (Nieto, 1999; Erickson, 2011). This broader view of culture points to the complex and essential work of border brokers. Instead of focusing on how schools can *perform* multiculturalism, border brokers can help families navigate school spaces, sometimes subversively, by focusing on “othered” languages, cultural practices, and experiences. As such, I argue border brokers do much more than facilitate communication between the school and families; they are often called to *accompany* families as they act on their shared experiences of crossing borders (Sepúlveda, 2018). While cross-cultural relationships may indeed be important aspects of belonging, the work of a border broker does not end at this point. Indeed, I argue that these two goals—building cross cultural relationships and engaging in culturally-affirming pedagogies of *acompañamiento*—are not mutually exclusive. I develop this claim in more detail in the next section.

### **Acompañamiento as Solidarity**

In the previous section, I described how DCISM faculty emphasize the importance of cross-cultural relationships in establishing a sense belonging in the school. These relationships are indeed important, especially in the context of racialized divisions fragmenting Montbello. However, I argue that we cannot discount the power of *collectively* sharing culturally specific spaces, practices and experiences. I argue that these two goals are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, in a few cases, I saw how *cross-cultural* relationships were built through pedagogies of *acompañamiento*. In some cases, these relationships were facilitated by other kinds of shared experiences—of immigration, language learning, colonialism—that transcended specific bonds of language, culture and race. Mr. Denis, the DCISM administrator, noted earlier that the potential for such cross-connections is “already there.” Mr. Denis was particularly well-

positioned to see these connections: originally from South Africa, he identifies as both Black and an immigrant. Perhaps because of these identities, his understanding of the divisions in Montbello goes beyond race. He shared, “In terms of the Montbello community, I mean there's a big divide in, I think, what immigrant parents need—of any race, irrespective of place—and what native Denverites, being here for a long time want and need” (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020). Here, Mr. Denis draws our attention to important aspects of diversity in Montbello; indeed, framing divisions in racial terms can mask other kinds of cultural, linguistic, and migration-related differences, as well as similarities, among community members.

Other faculty also noticed how students can bond around shared experiences navigating an unknown American education system and over struggles of learning English. Ms. Gray pointed to how African immigrant students, who often speak French, may feel more at home at DCISM than African-American students who grew up in Denver. She referenced how language—and the experiences of being a language-learner—can help students establish a sense of belonging at the school. She shared that, “Mr. Silva can speak French and so they feel more a part. That's why I was saying I think language has a lot more to do with this than race” (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). Here, the shared struggle of learning English may facilitate a sense of community among immigrant students. As she notes, some of the African immigrant students who speak French “are more connected to our second language students who speak Spanish because they both share that...If you're a second language learner, I think there is more of an openness to communicating because you both are trying to learn English” (Gray, interview, March 31, 2020). Implicit in Ms. Gray’s observation is that these students—while identifying as Black—may be able to forge relationships with other Latino immigrant students more easily than with other African American students enrolled at DCISM.

Parents also shared similar observations. An African immigrant and French-speaking mother, Mme Bonnet, noted that, although she can be categorized as Black, she does not feel she fits in with other Black residents of Denver. In an interview, she shared some wariness of her “frères noirs,” or “Black brothers,” because of several negative experiences, including one where she found her car window broken. She said she felt a “separation” with them, attributing this distance to the difference in experiences and the centrality of her immigrant experience:

Non, pas tous les noirs, les noirs et les noirs de l'Afrique, ils sont un peu gentils là, on s'en prête. Mais les noirs Américains je dis, les natifs, ceux qui sont nés des parents ici, leurs grands-parents, tout ça, il y a une différence entre nous les immigrées, nous qui venons d'ailleurs, nous les africaines qui venons d'ailleurs—et les africaines qui ont venu dans les temps-là, des temps-là, des siècles. Donc, nous avons peur d'eux parce qu'ils sont un peu agressifs. [No, not all the blacks. The blacks, and African blacks, they're a bit nicer there. But American blacks, those that are born from parents here, their grandparents, all that, there's a difference between us immigrants. Us that come from other places (abroad), us Africans that come from abroad—and the Africans that have come over time, a long time ago, centuries. So, we are a bit fearful of them because they are a bit aggressive. ]

(Bonnet, interview, September 16, 2020).

Here, this sense of distance—as well as a few experiences—led Mme Bonnet to adopt some of the negative stereotypes that are already firmly a part of American narratives about African Americans. She also shared how she felt a sense of connection with other immigrant parents at DCISM, even across language, culture and national origin. After three years in the school, she noted that families, “se connait, on se connait vraiment,” [we know each other, we really know each other]. For her, one key mechanism for building relationships were the parent decision-

making groups at DCISM. She shared that after the principal asked her to participate in the SAB and to be a leader during the parent advisory meetings, she agreed and proudly asserted, “Je fais partie de cette groupe-là, qui représente les immigrants qui parle français, les français, les swahili, donc comme ça. [I’m part of that group that represents the French-speaking immigrants, the French, the Swahili, like that] (Bonnet, interview, September 16, 2020). I asked if she ever felt left out, knowing that the principal was Latino and that most parents at the school were Latino and spoke Spanish with each other during meetings. She responded:

Non, je suis à l'aise parce que chaque fois qu'on a des meetings, qu'on a les réunions ou bien, les rencontres, souvent le principal utilise un professeur de français la. Il est [from an African Country], il s'appelle Mr. Diop, soit le principal appelle les gens qui interprète. [No, I’m comfortable because every time we have meetings, the reunions or the get-togethers, often the director uses a French teacher there. He’s [from an African country], his name is Mr. Diop, or the principal calls people to interpret.] (Bonnet, interview, September 16, 2020).

She continued to explain that she understands that “Le spanish c'est une langue qui est reconnue ici [Spanish is a well-known language here]” and that “dans une réunion, on est avec le principal, les Spanish sont à l'aise, ils parlent directement avec le principal espagnol, [at a meeting, we’re with the principal, the Spanish are at ease, they speak directly with the Spanish principal.]” But because of the translators present at every meeting for French-speaking parents, she repeated: “Non, on n'est pas dérange, tant plus que nous tous, nous avons le même traitement. [No, we’re not bothered, all of us receive the same treatment.]” (Bonnet, interview, September 16, 2020). Here, echoing back to our discussion of engagement practices, the principal’s efforts to establish committees representing all communities in the school and ensuring reliable translation were

important in making Mme Bonnet feel welcome. The ease of participating in decision-making at the school helped her experience a sense of belonging. I also observed how she took on leadership roles in these spaces: interacting with—and welcoming—other parents at advisory meetings, generating questions for the parent survey, and directing tough questions to teachers during the School Advisory Board meetings.

The experiences of Mme Bonnet, while small examples, are also suggestive of the potential connections—and shared struggles—between immigrant families. Such shared struggles can be understood in terms of the consequences of colonialism, or what Mignolo (2011) terms the “colonial wound.” Mignolo (2011) argues that individuals in very different parts of the world can undergo similar circumstances of turmoil and collective memory, experiences that may have affected people differently in different places, although they are connected through the colonial wound” (p. 97). Although it might be easier to see how Latin American and African immigrants share these struggles, African Americans might also be understood as experiencing a certain kind of colonial wound.

At DCISM, Mr. Denis underscored this connection. Perhaps because of Mr. Denis’s vantage point as a Black immigrant, he notices such shared wounds across different students and families at DCISM. In discussing how the school might address the different needs of immigrant parents and those that are native to Montbello, he shared:

This is what our PD this year is focused on. That's really at the intersection of race and language. Race, language and language development. A lot of what immigrant parents need are what native, Denverite, English-speaking-all-their-life, Black parents need. In essence, it's a value of the restoration of human dignity. And so, what that looks like is for a school like DCIS, that is immigrant heavy, that is second language learner, English

language learner heavy, TNLI<sup>19</sup> school. It needs a particular attitude towards language development that is really counterculture, counter to American culture. There needs to be a high value on multilingualism. And that is something that Black families need as well, just in a slightly different way (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).

Mr. Denis points to the “restoration of human dignity” as an overarching aim for all families at DCISM, and this requires addressing race *and* language. Here, a focus on language is not just a need of immigrant students, but for all students who have been marginalized through language; in other words, for others who have been colonized. Mr. Denis continued to explain, arguing that for the “Black community—I’m talking about Black Americans who speak one language—They face the same thing. It’s just Black English versus standardized English, right?” (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020). He described how, earlier in his career as a teacher, he faced resistance from Black students when teaching them about their globalized roots:

One of the issues that sticks out to me a lot as an early teacher was when I would tell Black students that you have African heritage. And they would totally resist that. And so: “I don’t have any connection to Africa. I’m not African. I’m not an African Booty Scratcher.” All that kind of really colonized oppressive thinking that has been their environment. Really, you know reeducating in the way that mitigates resistance, that mitigates a condescending attitude...I haven’t seen that too much in terms of that rejection of African heritage in Montbello. I think that the parents here are pretty well educated in terms of like Black consciousness. But I think they would still be resistant around a concept like Black English and saying this is worthy to understand because there are people who are not you, making a lot of money on things that are you with cultural

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<sup>19</sup> Transitional Native Language Instruction

appropriation, and all of that. Black folks in this country need to understand that their culture is worldwide. (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).

Mr. Denis points to the need to decolonize Black students' thinking about their own identities, roots, and even language practices. By emphasizing that their culture is worldwide, Mr. Denis is also pointing to the shared struggles of the colonial wound and how these struggles connect different cultures, ethnic groups, and races. Mignolo (2011) argues that this approach is what decolonization looks like, acknowledging that "there are different modes of experiencing the colonial wound and of engaging the decolonial option" (p. 109). Here, Mignolo's (2011) understanding of a decolonial "immigrant consciousness" echoes some of Mr. Denis's aims:

"Immigrant consciousness," double consciousness, mestiza consciousness, mulatto consciousness, inter-cultural consciousness (as indigenous people in Ecuador maintain today), maroon consciousness (as it has been established among Afro-Andeans in Ecuador), all are diverse expressions and experiences of the same condition of existence: the awareness of colonality of being, of being out of place in the set of regulations (e.g., cosmology) of "modernity." (p. 109).

Mr. Denis underscores the need for a shared decolonial consciousness by pointing to the shared struggles and needs of both immigrant and native Denverite students, regardless of race. Building on his insights, I argue that building trust and relationships by engaging with culture, language, and border-crossing experiences does not need to be *racialized*, or understood as separate, segregated cultural practices for Latino or African American families. By acknowledging broader global diasporas and the "double consciousness" of being "out of place," border brokers like Mr. Denis can start to create spaces where diverse students—and their families—might be able to name and transcend their *colonial wounds*.

Acompañamiento centers on the border-crossing experience as “a fluid cultural practice of solidarity, advocacy, and relationship/community building based on cultural knowledge situated in border zones” (Sepúlveda, 2018, p. 55). Here, I stress that acompañamiento includes all that have transcended borders. I suggest that even long-term African American residents of Montbello share certain kinds of border-crossing experiences. In the early days of Montbello, they fought to establish a community of their own, and to see that community recognized through its schools. In more recent years, they have been trying to maintain that community, in the face of rapid demographic changes, and district policies that dismantled one of the most significant symbols of community identity: the neighborhood high school. Here, Ms. Thompson, an African American parent, noted a sense of alienation, and the loss of place, sharing: “It could be maybe the racial division comes from the fact that maybe African Americans feel like they're being shut out when they've been pushed out of the community. And, so, they feel alienated in the community itself” (Thompson, interview, April 3, 2020). In a sense, borders are being re-established, in ways that might alienate even the long-term residents or neighborhoods. Practices that recognize this shared colonial wound, or struggle for belonging, could foster a pedagogy of acompañamiento centered on diverse border-crossing experiences.

### **Building a Team of Border Brokers**

Building this form of belonging and solidarity through pedagogies of acompañamiento—and calling for more individuals to engage in these pedagogies—may be a challenge when, as I have cautioned, this practice relies on (sometimes idiosyncratic) relationships between people. It is a relational pedagogy, not an operationalizable practice. For example, Mr. Silva—in his role as principal—might engage in these practices himself or try to create spaces for others to do so. But beyond this, efforts to “scale up” pedagogies of *acompañamiento* can be challenging and cannot



be forced upon other leaders or faculty who do not share those experiences. Parents have also noted how the sense of belonging they have experienced at the school relies on Mr. Silva. Juana, a Central American mother, reflected on Mr. Silva's ability to make parents feel welcome, and the central role played by his leadership:

Juana: One, is his personality, he has the personality of a leader. And two, his knowledge of cultures and languages. And he truly is interested in each person and he makes you feel close to him.

A: Let's say he left the school, and the rest of the school stays the same. Do you think that this welcoming environment would stay the same?

Juana: No. Definitely not.

A: Do you think that there is a way for this welcoming environment to stay in the school if he left?

Juana: No. I think it depends a lot on administration and on people in certain positions. They say that changes are always good, but when there is a change like that—I think that it's not a good time for a change like that, because all of the work he has done would...diminish. Only if another person would come that had similar qualities in languages, personality, or experiences...but that would be difficult to find<sup>20</sup>.

(J., interview, April 13, 2020)

Although the principal's work with parents did shape school wide practices—for example, in creating parent advisory boards—and also influenced other faculty members, this does not necessarily mean that *acompañamiento* was *institutionalized*. Arguably, in cases like when Mr.

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<sup>20</sup> While this interview was conducted in Spanish, I only include the English translation because of the length of the passage.

Silva changed the testing dates, *acompañamiento* became more systemic; but if the principal leaves, most school practices, and all district policies, will have stayed the same.

With Montbello leaders and school district officials seeking to improve school-community relationships, as well as scholars calling for more inclusive engagement approaches in schools that leverage family and community assets, we might ask: how can we engage in more pedagogies of *acompañamiento* to build a sense of belonging and solidarity in our schools? (Jiménez-Castellanos et al., 2016; Chavez-Reyes, 2010; Georgis et al., 2014). In lieu of institutionalizing these pedagogies, I argue that schools can build a *team* of border brokers that, individually, engage in small acts of *acompañamiento*. However, in this section, I argue that this team of border brokers—more than just a team of educators of Color—is developed through collective learning as they question the educational system. Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) describe border brokers’ actions as “insurgent moves” where they “tore free from the dictates of officialdom to chart their own course for engaging with and addressing the needs of Mexican-origin students” (p. 48). For example, Sepúlveda (2018) details that these insurgent acts occur when educators, “either throw out the official school curriculum or to move beyond their educational scripts, job descriptions, and roles,” (p. 54). Even through these seemingly small acts, *acompañamiento* is an act of resistance to larger systems and institutions, and therefore, an act of insurgency.

Mr. Silva has been partially successful in building what we might consider to be a team of border brokers. As I conducted research, I identified several border brokers in DCISM staff. These were individuals that guided parents through potentially marginalizing practices—such as in navigating and challenging the English-dominant environment in schools. In various ways, I argue that these teachers and staff engage in pedagogies of *acompañamiento*, where, as

Sepúlveda (2008) develops, educators move beyond their “educational scripts” in order to find culturally specific ways to empower and engage student voices and experiences. For example, several of the staff that I have come to see as border brokers work in the Newcomer Center. This program focuses on immigrant students who have newly arrived in the U.S. and who are learning English. Mr. Martinez, a teacher who identifies as a South American immigrant, leads a class of about 30 newcomer students, most from Latin America. Mr. Martinez reflected on his role as a newcomer teacher, where he is often the first point of contact for immigrant students:

Pero es bien bonito en el sentido de que los niños que llegan, es como que uno es su primer contacto con la escuela. Y para ellos puede ser como su primer contacto con la cultura de los Estados Unidos. A pesar de que somos una comunidad muy hispana, uno es como su primer contacto con todo. Entonces digamos que nosotros somos como los papás adoptivos de ellos. [But it’s a beautiful experience in the sense that the kids arrive, it’s like you are their first contact with the school. And for them you could be the first contact with the culture in the United States. And despite us being a very Hispanic community, you are the first contact with everything. So let’s say that we are like their adoptive parents.] (Martinez, interview, September 5, 2020).

Mr. Martinez points to the necessity of his role in welcoming students and guiding them through an unknown education system. In meetings where they have invited newcomer parents to the school, I have witnessed Mr. Martinez and Mr. Silva work together to explain basic schooling practices to parents, such as how the American grading system works.

Teachers are not the only border brokers at DCISM. Mr. Silva has also hired four paraprofessionals for the Newcomer Center, all of whom are immigrants, Montbello residents, and Spanish-speakers. Mr. Martinez shared that these paraprofessionals are essential to the

center, especially because of their ability to connect with students through their migration experiences and because of their knowledge of the Montbello community. It is important to note their contribution to DCISM's transnational spaces since Ventura (2020) argues that paraprofessionals are often overlooked as valuable employees in schools and their work can be less visible to teachers and less supported by administrators. Other individuals like social workers also play border broker roles at DCISM. For example, Ms. Melendez is a social worker that has developed trusting connections with many Latino immigrant parents. When I asked Ms. Melendez during an interview whether her Latina identity helped her build relationships, she shared:

I think it's really important. And a lot more parents have been coming to me or like one parent tells another parent like, "Hey, call this person and she can figure out something for your student." And, so, I've been getting a lot of like: "Well, this parent told me to call you". So, then we do some troubleshooting to see what we can fix. But then I do feel like being bilingual really helps parent engagement and not have the barrier of language or...Even an interpreter—as much as the interpreters are really helpful—it's not really building a relationship with the person when they're translating (Melendez, interview April 3, 2020).

Ms. Melendez's statement points to how language is a vehicle to build relationships with parents and how cultural knowledge can be a foundation for advocacy. Although Ms. Melendez grew up in Denver, and is not an immigrant, she is "a child of migrations" (Sepúlveda, 2018) and understands the power of sharing a language. In her statement, she shed light on how translation may be a barrier to building relationships and how advocating for your child—which may include difficult conversations—may require the human connection fostered through sharing a

language. Parents have valued her accompaniment, sharing, for example, experiences of how Ms. Melendez helped them navigate the confusing landscape of IEP plans for special education. Lorena described how Ms. Melendez guided her in advocating for her son in an article that our research group published in Montbello's MUSE magazine:

Adicionalmente, buscamos que el personal nos dé apoyo cuando hay necesidades para nuestros hijos. Por ejemplo, cuando yo pedí el plan 504 para mi hijo, yo me sentí cómoda abogando por mi hijo. Se me hizo fácil porque la trabajadora social hablaba español y pudimos trabajar juntas para hacer un plan. [Additionally, we want the personnel to support us to meet our children's needs. For example, when I asked for a 504 plan for my son, I felt comfortable advocating for my son. It was easy for me because the social worker spoke Spanish and we worked together to create a plan] (Contreras, 2020).

Ms. Melendez guided Lorena in her efforts to advocate for her child. Connections of language and culture facilitated trust and allowed the pair to collaboratively decide what was best for Lorena's son. Similarly, Sra. Gutierrez, a Mexican mother, described how Ms. Melendez is the person she has the most trust in, especially after she mediated a conflict with a teacher about addressing the academic *and* emotional needs of her son. She said she felt more *confianza* with Ms. Melendez because of “como te tratan, como tratan de mediar, tratan de tener todo claro, para que uno entienda. [how they treat you, how they try to mediate, try to make everything clear, so that you can understand.” (Gutierrez, interview, September 8, 2020).

The practices of Ms. Melendez, Mr. Martinez, and others echo other studies of *acompañamiento*. As Ventura (2020) argues, border brokers understand that “the US schooling system is not structured for the success of Latinx students,” and instead “employ pedagogies of *acompañamiento* to demystify the unspoken expectations for high school and college” (p. 657).

Ventura (2020) has also framed this work as a kind of “bridging work” where educators create “a borderlands space” where “ closer relationships with both students and their families” allow them to best “advocate for their needs,” (Ventura, 2020, p. 657). However, these teachers also challenged commonplace educational practices, as they stressed that learning English and acclimating to a new environment are not the only worthwhile goals. Notably, Mr. Martinez stressed how his role as a teacher goes beyond supporting academic learning; the emotional needs of students are just as important:

El propósito académico de nosotros es enseñarles inglés a ellos, pero está esa parte emocional que está muy pegada allí. Y aparte que es muy necesaria porque muchos de nuestros estudiantes no sólo son inmigrantes—no es que ellos dijeron: “Me voy a vivir a los Estados Unidos”. Sino que vienen con experiencias muy complicadas. Y que requieren de un apoyo socio emocional muy, muy, muy, muy constante. [Our academic purpose is to teach them English, but there is that emotional part that is very tied to that. And besides, it is very necessary because many of our students are not just immigrants—it’s not that they said: “I’m leaving to go live in the United States.” They come with complicated experiences. And that requires a socioemotional support that’s very, very, very, very constant.] (Martinez, interview, September 5, 2020).

Here, Mr. Martinez highlights how the term “immigrant” may mask his students’ “complicated” migration experiences and seeks to engage and support these student experiences. In both cases, Mr. Martinez demonstrates some of the “border gnosis” described by Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020). He is able to recognize how the needs of his students may deviate from mainstream norms of schooling. In a similar sense to the border broker educators in Sepúlveda’s (2018) study, Mr. Martinez’s knowledge of his students led him to move towards aspects of an

“insurgent pedagogy,” even in small ways, as he prioritized socioemotional support over academic goals. However, he stopped short of providing a developed critique of the policies that force him to prioritize these academic goals over socioemotional supports. It is here, I argue, where DCISM may fall short of fulfilling the potential of developing a team of border brokers.

These border brokers, although they challenge the norms in schools that prioritize learning English and academic achievement, may not yet have a developed insight or the language to name the root of the harms they see perpetuated in traditional educational practices. Therefore, it can be dangerous to assume that all teachers of color or bilingual teachers are already border brokers who wish to subvert existing systems and transform spaces. In DCISM, even teachers who I have seen engage as border brokers can take up problematic discourses about immigrant students. For example, one immigrant teacher espoused negative stereotypes about an immigrant student when she said: “No saben, como que, oyen. Acá hay agua. Osea ya se pueden bañar [They don’t know, it’s like, hey. There’s water here. Like, you can take a bath now,” (interview, September 4, 2020). Immigrant experiences alone do not lead a detailed critique of dominant structures, especially when immigrants may strive to assimilate into dominant forms of thinking and being. Therefore, educators become border brokers when they have adopted critiques of educational systems and norms of success and questioned systemic forms of marginalization. Furthermore, border brokers must also subvert or challenge those systems. Sepúlveda (2018) argues that border brokers, like the educators in his study, “were calling for, and leading by example, in implementing a contextual, border pedagogy, a pedagogy of Acompañamiento that, at its core, is communal, dialogical, and transformational” (p. 66). To move towards this *transformational* potential of acompañamiento, it is essential to challenge or subvert the damaging practices in schools and push for more humanizing ways of connecting

with students. At times, this may include challenging parents when they have absorbed deficit narratives about language and culture. For example, while Mr. Denis advocates for listening to parents, he is also willing to push them on their mindsets:

That piece of bringing the parents to the table and ultimately also bring the kids to the table, but bringing them to the table in a way that values their opinion, but then also pushes them critically because we all need to get pushed critically. You know parents don't get to escape that (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).

Mr. Denis recognizes that his role as a border broker requires him to guide them to be successful within the dominant system, *and* to push them to rethink norms of success. He continued to describe what the DCISM community needs:

A school that values multilingualism, that values translanguaging practices. That is what, from my perspective, that is what this community needs. And that's coming from a very...(sighs)—I'll say this—There are parents who don't want their children speaking Spanish because they want them to learn English. Anybody who has had immigrant parents or English as a second language, having encountered friends or ourselves, have had those experiences with parents who will refuse to allow their children to continue to develop in their heritage language. So, in part we need a school in the community that can kind of speak to that. And speak to kids who may not value their heritage language. And that's a really nuanced process and it takes a certain type of educator to do that. And most people are not educated in that manner. And so, at DCIS Montbello with our PD that I'm building, that's really the stance that we're taking. And, I can already hear rumblings of: why do I have to worry about this? It's not my discipline. (Denis, interview, September 2, 2020).



Therefore, Mr. Denis pushes for *transformation* when he listens to parents as well as challenges them to question the dominant narrative. First, he pushes parents to question educational policies and practices that position learning English for academic success—an educational approach present in the Newcomer Center’s goals. Second, he uses his influence as a new administrator to disrupt this narrative through teacher training. He alludes to teacher resistance to this approach to language, but continues to strive to support learning that values families’ heritage and experiences.

Although several DCISM staff have engaged in humanizing practices and pedagogies, spaces of dialogue must be created to foment the development of more border brokers—like Mr. Denis—that engage in critiques of systems and push for a solidarity founded on shared colonial wounds. This is precisely where transformation can occur, and this is where DCISM leaders can act: to cultivate a sense of belonging with border brokers and families, spaces must be *intentionally* transformed to include dialogue, sharing, and collective learning—in other words, a place where *autoformación* can occur. Dyrness (2016) argues that *autoformación* occurs in a third space, a “space of meaning where constant and conscious negotiation of one’s identity is the mode of survival and resistance” (p. 12). Drawing from third-world feminism, Dyrness demonstrates how, in this collective process of decolonization through self-recovery, individuals share in a “process of healing from the wounds of racism and reclaiming wholeness” (Dyrness, 2016, p. 2). She further argues that *autoformación* seeks to “engage with multiple structures of domination” that includes both individual self-actualization and collective struggle (Dyrness, 2016, p.2). Border brokers like Mr. Denis can help to create these spaces for *autoformación* as parents, students, and teachers share experiences, question structures of domination, and continuously negotiate their identities to ultimately create a transformational educational space.

As collective learning emerges, so will border brokers who develop deep, detailed critiques of educational aims and practices. For DCISM to build a sense of belonging and a transformational space of learning, building this border broker team is essential. Therefore, building a border broker team calls for hiring of more educators of color, *as well as* building spaces of dialogue where these educators can share and reflect on their experiences as they question the structures that shape these experiences.

There are challenges even in accomplishing the former goal: Mr. Silva has described the difficulties in finding faculty and staff that reflect the student body of Montbello. He has attempted to do this through a school district program that hires Spanish-speaking teachers directly from Spain and Peru. However, he lamented that the district does not hire from Mexico or Central America, where most of his students are from: “Los de España y Perú no necesariamente se van a identificar culturalmente con los estudiantes. Los de España son blancos, son Europeos,” [Teachers from Spain and Peru are not necessarily going to identify culturally with students. Those from Spain are white, they are European]” (fieldnotes, February 16, 2021). Mr. Silva understands the need for educators that share language, *as well as* culture and experiences, and points to the district’s lack of attention to these differences in efforts to diversify the teacher workforce. Another barrier to hiring more educators of color is teacher turnover, which creates an unstable environment that also jeopardizes relationship-building. However, border broker educators may be more motivated to stay in their schools because of their connections with students. Mr. Martinez described how his immigrant identity influenced his attachment to his current job and school:

He pasado por las mismas penurias que [mis estudiantes] han—no mentiras. ¡No por las mismas, ni comparación! Pero siempre conozco qué siente uno al llegar a un lugar nuevo,

no hablar el idioma y todo lo que implica ser inmigrante. Entonces yo estoy en ese lugar donde puedo ayudar más. Para mí, no puedo estar en mejor lugar. Yo estoy cómodo. Yo estoy muy cómodo. [I have gone through the same hardships as [my students]—no that’s a lie. Not through the same ones, there’s no comparison! But still I know what it feels like to arrive in a new place, not speak the language and everything that it means to be an immigrant. So I am in a place where I can help more. For me, I can’t be in a better place. I am comfortable. I am very comfortable.] (Martinez, interview, September 5, 2020).

Mr. Martinez recognizes that although his immigration to the U.S. was a more privileged one, he still connected with students through his immigrant identity. This connection led to a profound sense of purpose in teaching newcomers, inspiring him to stay.

Therefore, both hiring teachers and staff of color as well as those that are immigrants or children of immigrants can be a first step towards building this team of border brokers. However, to accomplish this goal, these educators must also engage in a collective space that may provide the possibilities for transformation, especially when those spaces allow for collective sharing and reflection on dominant structures, practices, and narratives (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020). As individuals engage in this collective reflexivity, a “collective process of self-recovery and consciousness-raising” can occur (Dyrness, 2016, p. 2). As an example of how these spaces have the potential to transform, in the following chapter, I describe how our research group, Madres de DCIS, conducted research and reflected on our work and environment, as we accompanied each other and developed a space of belonging.

## Ch. VIII: Building Belonging through Research

DCISM is a small school, focused on newcomer immigrant students and their families, in a fractured and fragmented neighborhood. As I argued in previous chapters, in such a space, pedagogies of *acompañamiento* are central to building trust and a sense of belonging. In this chapter, I argue that a space of belonging can be created *through* the research process itself. I focus on my collaborative and evolving work with a group of mothers at DCISM—Madres de DCIS—to explore parent and community engagement practices in the school and Montbello neighborhood. I first describe how our research group developed into a space of investigation, reflection, and advocacy. From our initial efforts to explore parent engagement practices at DCISM, our work came to focus on the district’s efforts to reestablish a comprehensive high school in Montbello. This move—which also meant that DCISM would close—led our group to become more involved in the district-led engagement forums for the proposed new high school, and in other efforts to foreground the Latino community’s interests and needs in this design-process. Our group has challenged power dynamics in ways that reveal some of the strengths of participatory research.

Yet, our efforts have not always been successful. Our group has faced—and continues to face—daunting challenges and barriers that threaten to demoralize the mothers. I describe how the mothers have responded to these barriers, conceptualizing their responses as *pauses*, or productive interruptions to ways of being, doing, and knowing (Patel, 2015). Such pauses, as Patel argues, “hold space for learning” (2015, p. 1). In our group, this framework has also allowed us to rethink what success means in advocacy efforts. I conclude by refocusing on the kinds of change that can be achieved *through* the process of advocacy, rather than solely

understanding change as an *outcome* of such processes. Throughout, I attempt to show how participatory research initiatives, like ours, can be another way to build a sense of belonging.

### **Madres de DCIS**

Madres de DCIS was created in the fall of 2019 and, over time and through an ebb and flow of parent participation, developed into a Participatory Action Research (PAR) group with seven individuals at its core. Six of these core members are Latin American immigrant mothers living in Montbello and have children attending DCISM middle and high schools. Juana is a Central American mother who has lived in the U.S. and in Montbello for 20 years. Lorena is also a Central American mother who has lived in the U.S. for about 20 years and spent 10 of those in Montbello. She describes herself as a *conectora*, as she has worked for several years in a local organization where she managed social activities, relationship development with partner providers, resource connection, and data collection for the Montbello community. Lorena invited Teresa, another *conectora*, to our research group. Teresa has lived in the U.S. and Montbello for 11 years. A fourth member of the research group is Jaqui, who has lived in the U.S. for 17 years, and spent the 5 most recent years living in Montbello. However, she moved to Montbello because of her work and her deep involvement in Montbello organizations. She currently directs her own nonprofit organization in Montbello. The other mothers are more recent immigrants. Isabel, a Mexican mother, and Denise, a Central American mother, migrated to the U.S. in the last 3 years. The last individual in the core group is Ms. Marta, a staff member at DCISM working on parent engagement. This staff member—a bilingual, Spanish-speaking Latina who has worked on the Montbello campus for more than 10 years—was invited by a mother and joined the group in fall of 2020. She has participated in the sharing and planning of the group since that time, building close relationships with the rest of the mothers in the group.

This combination of knowledge and experiences in the group provided a fruitful space for participatory action research. Here, our group was guided by traditions and ideas in the field that seek to disrupt the patterns of power typically seen in research. As researchers who designed the research process and determined advocacy goals, the mothers participated in and directed their own production of knowledge. This form of participation, Hurtig (2008a) argues, challenges power dynamics by putting “research in the service of community struggles and the development of critical local knowledge,” instead of producing knowledge for academia and academic circles (p. 103). Similarly, Torres and Ayala (2009) assert that PAR collectives create new spaces and forms of relationships that run counter to traditional social hierarchies; these spaces create passageways to new ideas and consciousness, or *entremundos*—“that by crossing you invite a turning point, initiate a change” (p. 389). Our group also disrupted the ways in which parents are expected to participate in schools. Usually, parents are asked to engage in school-centered events that seek to “train” parents about how to best prepare their children for success in school (Hong, 2019; Ishimaru, 2020). However, Madres de DCIS, in addition to disrupting these narratives, also continued to renegotiate its role in DCISM and school district engagement efforts as an organized group and expand the scope of its work. The group was initially created in the Fall of 2019 through DCISM’s parent advisory meetings, which I described in more detail in Chapter 6. After my involvement in one of the first meetings of the year, the parent advisory meeting structure allotted time for parents to meet in working groups to collaboratively investigate and plan for changes they wanted to see in the school environment. Parents decided to create two working groups: one aimed at addressing bullying in school and another addressing parent engagement in DCISM. Mr. Silva placed me in charge of leading the parent engagement group. I was asked to help them get their project started and guide them as they discussed their goals and

planned for action. These meetings were held monthly in the school library and Mr. Silva participated as well, often moving back and forth between both groups. The activities of the parent engagement group began with about 15 parents discussing the successes and weaknesses of existing school engagement opportunities. They also reflected on how parents were already participating and how they might be encouraged to participate more. In this discussion, they decided to learn more about parent attitudes, experiences, and needs for engagement in Montbello. To do this, parents suggested designing a survey: to ask parents about barriers to engagement, as well as the types of engagement opportunities they wanted to see in the school. This survey, parents posed, might help their group develop initiatives or events in collaboration with school faculty that aligned with parents' needs.

In the following meetings, parents participated in planning for the creation and dissemination of the survey. Since the parent advisory meetings were only held monthly, the parent engagement group decided to meet every two weeks in order to meet our goals more quickly. The variation in meeting times allowed for a fluid group of multiple individuals to work on this effort. However, participation in the group began to solidify over time. By the time the survey was sent out, two mothers—Isabel and Juana—were deeply committed to working on the project. After we received the survey responses, Isabel, Juana, and I met to identify themes and patterns in the results. In December 2019, five mothers joined the meeting to discuss these themes in the survey results. Isabel, Juana, Lorena, Jaqui, and Teresa would form the core of the research group; a group that we newly named “Madres de DCIS.”

In the December research meeting, the mothers worked with Mr. Silva to arrange and design a presentation to all teachers on the results of their research during a professional development session. In this presentation, I first presented the survey results. Some of the

findings provided information on the biggest barriers to engagement for parents and the types of opportunities for engagement parents wanted<sup>21</sup>. The mothers followed with a presentation of their analysis of this information. They found that parents wanted more informal time to get to know teachers on a more personal level; and called for more faculty commitment to engagement and developing authentic relationships with families. They also argued that building strong school-family relationships could break the cycle of teacher turnover, a problem in Montbello schools that deeply concerned the mothers. To support their argument, the five mothers gave several *testimonios* on how previous experiences of faculty reaching out to them—especially through home visits—have impacted their and their children’s lives. Juana said that it was important for families to identify with teachers and vice versa, because it allowed everyone to “ser humano, conocerlos más, ver sus caras afuera, fuera de las aulas [be human, get to know you more, see your faces outside, outside of the classrooms]” (fieldnotes, December 11, 2019). They called on teachers to do more collaborative work and create teams with common goals. They ended by saying that these relationships were a priority since it could help to retain teachers and to build a deeper bond with their students and families. Juana explained how important it was for parents to be able to “ubicar a ustedes como personas, y ustedes con nosotros. Tener una conexión. Les va a gustar y se van a quedar. Vemos la rotación de personal en la escuela. Queremos ser un puente para que se queden. [discover you as people, and you discover us. Make a connection. You will like it and you will want to stay. We see the turnover of personnel in the school. We want to be a bridge for you to stay]” (fieldnotes, December 11, 2019).

In this presentation, the mothers expertly tied two pressing issues in Montbello together: the need to strengthen parent engagement and the need to retain teachers. In their experience, the

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<sup>21</sup> This information is described in more detail in Chapters 2 and 5.



teachers who made the effort to build relationships with them were teachers committed to staying in Montbello. Their analysis and synthesis of information is an example of knowledge production, something that Fine (2018) argues has been historically reserved for elite circles. She argues that a long legacy of critical researchers “all argue for community-based, participatory research by, with, and alongside communities, engaged to contest the hegemonic academic hold on what is read as valid science and to widen the construct of expertise” (Fine, 2018, p. 72). The mothers’ process of designing research, analyzing findings, determining a course of action, and mobilizing a collaboration with teachers positioned this group as powerful actors in the production of knowledge to improve the education of their children.

Group members shared that their ability to produce knowledge and direct their knowledge in ways they saw fit was one of the most valuable and empowering aspects of participating in Madres de DCIS. In a focus group I held in February of 2021, where I asked the members to reflect on their learning, Juana described the experience of producing knowledge and advocating for change:

El inicio para mí fue muy interesante. Creo que íbamos por buen camino haciendo todos los estudios que necesitábamos en cómo acercar a la comunidad, cómo unir a los maestros, como estábamos comunicándonos con ellos. Y siento que nuestro trabajo hasta ahí iba bien y que valía la pena el tiempo que uno estaba invirtiendo en todo ese tipo de reuniones. [The beginning for me was very interesting. I think that we were on the right track doing all of the studies that we needed on how to bring the community closer, how to unify the teachers, how we were communicating with them. And I feel that our work till then was going well and that it was worth the time that we were investing in all of those meetings] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Juana listed the group's goals and activities and felt that working towards these goals was "interesting" and "worth" their time and effort. These goals, design of the research process, and presentation to teachers were all chosen by the mothers based on the research findings and what they felt were the most urgent needs for family engagement at DCISM. In effect, the mothers had power to make decisions over their research and strategies for building relationships. The mothers also recognized that this work gave them opportunities to collaborate and communicate directly with school leaders for improved family engagement. Several mothers noted that the principal's allocation of space at parent advisory meetings gave them the room to engage in this work. For example, Lorena pointed out that this research group was created through Mr. Silva's actions: "Todo esto comenzó cuando su papá tomó la iniciativa de formar pequeños grupos dentro de la escuela [This all began when your father took the initiative to form small groups within the school]" (focus group, February 19, 2021). Juana elaborated on how his actions in these meetings and in research groups led them to feel supported and "integrated":

Ana, yo creo que un punto importante de mencionar es que cuando empezamos con este grupo, nosotros lo empezamos haciendo bajo la dirección de DCIS que actualmente pues es del señor Silva. El incluyó a los padres de familia. Ha tratado de hacerlo para las personas que hablan en francés, para las diferentes comunidades. Entonces eso fue como sentirnos apoyados, integrados cuando esto empezó. [Ana, I think that an important point to mention is that when we began with this group, we began under the DCIS administration that, right now, is under Mr. Silva's administration. He included parents. He has tried to do this for those that speak French, for different communities. So that is how we came to feel supported, integrated when this began.]" (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Here, Juana described how these meetings gave them room to be heard, and that the principal welcomed their leadership to explore the problems—and solutions—that influenced school’s decisions. Just as Juana described, their work and the recognition of this work by the principal “integrated” them into the school community. In a similar sense, Lorena spoke about how the research space contributed to advocacy efforts and where they found support in DCISM faculty and staff: “Entonces de alguna manera he sacado ideas y me ha dado el valor esta investigación para poder yo como mamá, abogar por mi hijo y pelear por las necesidades como estudiante. Hasta ahorita he encontrado apoyo tanto en el personal de la escuela, como el director, como los maestros, la trabajadora social. [So, in a way, I have gotten ideas and this investigation has given me the courage to, as a mom, advocate for my child and fight for his needs as a student. Until now, I have found support in the school personnel, like the principal, teachers, and social worker]” (focus group, February 19, 2021). Both Juana and Lorena describe the research group as a space where the mothers feel supported—and a sense of belonging— at DCISM without having to compromise their values and vision for education.

### **From school to community: expanding roles, new challenges**

The mother’s early research efforts, and the process of engaging in research, were valuable, allowing the mothers to take on substantive roles in school decision-making and challenge power dynamics. However, amid these efforts—focused on improving parent engagement at DCISM—the mothers were called to change the focus of their work. As detailed in Chapter 3, in 2019, the district launched a planning process to rebuild the Montbello campus building. While initially focused on rebuilding space for the three small schools located on the Montbello campus—including DCISM—conversations quickly turned towards the creation of a comprehensive high school that would absorb these existing schools. The mothers pointed to the

district announcement of the comprehensive high school, which jeopardized the existence of DCISM, as the moment that obligated them to change the course of their research efforts. Juana notes this shift, and shared that they felt obligated to act to ensure that their community's opinions would be taken into account:

Pero luego, cuando se dieron estos cambios del cambio de escuela y donde ya desaparecía DCIS y entró DPS con con todas sus decisiones, yo creo que—en mi opinión—la experiencia cambió totalmente. Ellos—DPS—nos tienen porque necesitan tener el nombre de que los Latinos estamos involucrados. Pero no porque realmente esté tomando en cuenta la opinión de nosotros. [But then, when these changes to the school occurred where DCIS would disappear and DPS came in with all of their decisions, I think that—in my opinion—the experience changed completely. They—DPS—have us because they need to have named that we Latinos are involved. But not because they are truly taking into account our opinion.] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

For Juana, the district's decision abruptly shifted their research efforts. But, in contrast to her experience sharing research with the DCISM community, she feels their new efforts have not been supported or integrated into district decision-making. For her, the “experience changed completely.” For Juana, this change was so abrupt that “es como sentir que retrocedimos, que nos hicieron retroceder, que nos pararon en este sentido. [it's a feeling that we were going backwards, that they were making us go backwards, that they stopped us in that sense]” (focus group, February 19, 2021). Instead of working on the goals they developed for DCISM as a result of the survey and presentation to teachers, the mothers were obligated to consider the effects of this comprehensive high school and how it could lead to the possibility of their school being closed or absorbed into a larger high school. After this announcement, the mothers felt

urgency to protect their school and advocate for a bilingual leader to continue to lead the new Montbello school. Instead of working to collaborate with teachers, they focused their efforts on bringing awareness of the school changes to other parents, to include Latino parent voices in the district decision-making process, and to ensure that the Latino community as a whole felt empowered to participate in the designing of the new school.

While motivated to act, the mothers were aware that their work was now structured as a *response* to district initiatives, rather than around their own interests and priorities. The mothers went from controlling their research to responding to what they perceived as threats to their school and their vision for education. Their work increasingly happened on the district's terms (what should a new Montbello campus—and high school—look like?), and often in district-sponsored spaces (including community forums). Their experience points to limitations for PAR groups. As the groups confront other structural and policy changes, they can lose control over their research goals and the kinds of strategies available to them. In the case of the mothers, this abrupt change of direction caused the mothers to feel *desilusión*, or disillusionment. Moreover, after DPS officially announced that DCISM would close after the 2021-2022 school year, the parents felt a loss of hope, also tied to losing Mr. Silva as their leader. Juana said:

Cuando ya viene DPS y nos indica que una de las personas que van a cortar es [Mr. Silva] y empezamos a ver estos topes y a ver que el distrito va a quitarlo, es la parte desilusionante de esta situación. A nosotros se nos ayudó iniciando con [este proyecto] por la guía, el sentirnos integrados, de que estábamos dirigidos por alguien que nos hacía sentir parte, cosa que ahorita no se está sintiendo ya por parte de DPS. [When DPS came and indicated that one of the people they would cut was Mr. Silva and we began to see these obstacles and see that the district would take him away, it's the disillusioning part

of this situation. We were helped initiating this project because of the guidance, the feeling integrated, that we were being led by someone who made us feel a part, something that we are not feeling right now with DPS] (focus group, February 19, 2021). Juana points to how marginalizing these district changes were, and how the loss of their leader, their border broker, felt like a substantial hit to their group's progress. Even more so, Juana notes the loss of a feeling of belonging: "feeling integrated" and being made "a part" of a community. The mothers also wanted more consistency in their relationship with their children's schools, and the district's announcement pointed to more instability ahead.

As a result of these changes, the mothers engaged in several activities to advocate for the needs of Latino immigrant families in the creation of the new Montbello high school, but obstacles continued to threaten their morale. For instance, the mothers faced difficulties in participating in the district-sponsored engagement forums, and also felt that their input on the hiring process for the new school leader was not heard by district leaders. In many ways, these were negative experiences, and certainly setbacks in their advocacy efforts. However, I also saw how their collective experiences facing these obstacles became important learning experiences for our group. In this section, I analyze these moments and challenges, including district reforms, community engagement practices, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Pauses**

As discussed above, the Madres de DCIS were faced with the task of reformulating their work plan and adapting their goals to address district-imposed changes. Another event also disrupted their goals: the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing from decolonizing research traditions, Patel (2015) describes such interruptions as *pauses*. She explains that these pauses can be a "productive interruption" to "ways of being, doing, and knowing, and hold space for learning"

(Patel, 2015, p. 1). Drawing on this concept, I describe how these moments provided moments of learning and reflection. I describe three key pauses: the pandemic, district avenues for community feedback about the new high school, and their efforts to engage with local media.

First, in mid-March 2020, the emerging pandemic quickly put an end to research meetings and plans, as all school events were canceled. However, at the start of the 2020-2021 school year, the mothers reconvened to update their plans and reframe their goals. As part of this planning, the group discussed the new barriers their families were facing with the pandemic. For example, the closing of their school changed important routines. Many were less able to work as they had to stay home to care for their children and closing businesses had disrupted their employment and income. The mothers also shared that they were having a hard time transitioning to online learning with their children since they were uncomfortable with using some of the technology required for remote learning. It also interrupted their ability to participate in meetings, as they had to learn to use Zoom, fill out Google forms and use Google documents, and often had less access to translators in online meetings. When translators were provided by the district, there were often technical difficulties or not enough instructions on how to access translations. In all these ways, the pandemic interrupted their plans and forced the mothers to reflect on the new barriers impacting engagement in the Latino community. For example, Jaqui explained how paying attention to barriers from the pandemic affected their advocacy work:

Nosotros las mamás estamos pendientes de lo que pasa con nuestros hijos: si mi hijo no se puede meter a la clase de zoom y está teniendo problemas para entender a la maestra, como piensan que una mamá va a tener el suficiente empeño para hablar de cosas del building, de toda la escuela, y que afecta a todos los demás estudiantes, cuando mi propio hijo está teniendo problemas para meterse al zoom. A mi me importa más eso. Entonces

por eso las mamás tuvimos esas conversaciones en las reuniones porque para nosotros lo que vemos en el momento es lo importante. [Us, the moms, are conscientious of what is happening with our kids: if my son can't get into his zoom class and is having trouble understanding the teacher, how can they think that a mother is going to have enough determination to talk about the building, about the all of the school, about what affects other students, when my own kid is having problems getting into zoom. To me, that's more important. So that's why the moms had those conversations in the meetings, because for us, what we see in the moment is more important.] (J., interview, February 23, 2021).

Jaqui provides an analysis of how the pandemic has imposed other, often more urgent, needs for many Latino families. This may interrupt their engagement in larger, seemingly less urgent educational needs like participation in district decisions surrounding the new school. The pause that Covid-19 barriers caused in the work led the mothers to reflect on the structural barriers they faced everyday: access to and knowledge of technology, access to translation services, and their lack of knowledge of how to navigate educational systems. This pause pushed the mothers to think about how to adapt to these barriers and continue to push for the participation of Latino families in this process. For example, instead of requiring parents to spend time in online meetings to participate, the mothers decided to send bilingual postcards out to the community explaining the district changes and inviting the parents to participate in various decision-making opportunities provided by the district.

Another significant pause came from the mothers' growing participation in district avenues for community-led decision-making for the new high school. Many of the mothers saw this engagement as important because they felt that the Latino voice was not being heard by the



district, and they wanted to address the Latino community's needs in the design of the new school. In many ways, the district's efforts to re-open a comprehensive high school in Montbello were a response to the community's painful loss of its former high school. This decision had been met with outrage at the time, but it continued to be a rallying call for many community activists calling for change in district policies. Many of these activists represented and channeled the voices of African American residents of Montbello. But they did not represent some of the viewpoints of newer, immigrant residents, including many families enrolled in DCISM. Juana summarized some of these issues, and highlighted the changes to "who" is part of the Montbello community, and whose voices are recognized as speaking for that community. She shared:

Yo creo que es por la parte...de Montbello que lo consideran que sigue como hace 10 años atrás o un poco más donde la comunidad morena era la más fuerte...En la actualidad no se han dado cuenta de la cantidad de hispanos que ya vivimos ahí, que la situación ha cambiado, y que se maneja totalmente diferente. Entonces, sí, el problema de la división que tenemos es muy fuerte y sí, impacta el punto en que quieren decirnos que nosotros no tenemos voz y voto o que no somos los suficientes. Pero ya somos bastantes, ya somos suficientes. Pero todavía no sé logra tener ese espacio. [I think that it's the part...of Montbello that is still considered that it remains the way it was 10 years ago or more where the Black community was the stronger community...Now, they haven't realized the number of Hispanics that already live here, that the situation has changed, and that things run differently now. So, yes, the problem of division that we have is very strong and yes, it impacts us in that they want to tell us that we don't have enough voice and vote or that we don't have enough of us. But we are already a lot, we are already enough. But we still haven't achieved access to that space.] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Here, Juana highlights some of the racialized divisions in the Montbello community and the lack of power that newer Latino residents have in community conversations. The mothers feel that—despite their numbers in the community—Latino parents are not seen as a powerful or influential voice in decision-making in Montbello. The mothers were concerned that their vision of education—responsive to the needs of newcomer students and immigrant families—would not be considered in district planning efforts. Therefore, the mothers sought ways to integrate themselves into district meetings and committees. First, they participated in the periodic “Reimagining Montbello” meetings organized by the district. But they often found that the meetings impeded their full participation because they relied on translators, and often were not structured in ways that allowed time for adequate participation. In many cases, translation was complicated by the online format of meetings in the 2020-2021 school year. For instance, in one meeting, I witnessed how the translator was somehow kicked out of the meeting and the mothers were left on their own (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020). Later, the mothers debriefed this meeting and discussed how always hearing a translation left them with less opportunities for speaking up, as they were always one step behind the conversation (fieldnotes, November 5, 2020). In another Reimagining Montbello meeting, I witnessed how the translators were placed in separate break-out groups from the mothers who needed translation. Denise, the last mother to integrate herself to the group, described this experience as a frustrating one:

Entonces es frustrante estar en las reuniones a las que ya he asistido. Luego te ponen gente que solo habla inglés y luego te mandan a una sala sola, y termina la reunión y solo estuviste quince minutos y ya entendiste 5 minutos porque no había intérprete. [So it’s frustrating being in the meetings I have attended. Then they put people that only speak English and then they send you to a [zoom] room by yourself, and then the meeting ends

and you only spent 15 minutes and understood only 5 minutes because there was no interpreter] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

The language barrier continued to obstruct their participation in large district events. In response to some of these challenges, the mothers agreed to invite individuals with considerable influence over the decisions made around the new comprehensive schools to our research meetings on Friday afternoons. They saw this as a possible strategy for their voices to be heard by certain decision-makers. One of our members, Jaqui, who worked for a community organization in Montbello, was able to invite another member from her organization, Keisha, as well as Jennifer Bacon, the School Board representative of the Far Northeast, to one of our online meetings in September 2020. I translated for the mothers as they shared their visions for education. Most importantly, they wanted a bilingual leader who valued the cultures of their students. For example, Jaqui expressed to Jennifer Bacon that they valued how DCISM presently had this “sentido cultural” [cultural sense] and that it was important that the school valued their culture, and that the staff supported the parents 100%. She said that Mr. Silva, “siempre tiene empatía con las familias, y trabaja con ellos [always has empathy with the families and works with them]” (fieldnotes, September 18, 2020). She continued to explain that the principal spoke their language, opened the doors for them to participate in decision-making, took the time to know them and talk to them, and they felt that they could talk to him whenever needed. Jaqui stressed that these were the values that were important to them in designing the new school and choosing a new school leader. Ms. Bacon listened intently and promised the mothers that she would continue to talk to them and provided her email and phone number. Ms. Bacon expressed concern about the district’s difficulty in reaching out to the Latino community and asked for the group’s input on how to involve the community and get the word out about the comprehensive

high school more effectively. After this meeting, Jaqui and Isabel stayed online and excitedly talked about the meeting and about possible future collaborations with Ms. Bacon.

However, the group has not heard from her again, despite efforts to reach out to her through email. Moreover, in the October 2020 Reimagining Montbello meeting, a Latina Montbello resident shared that she had yet to see the district reaching out to the Brown community, especially those who don't speak English. She said that the community has changed in the last 20 years and that the district was not doing enough to reach out to the new community. The speaker again asked, "So how can you make that decision [about the school] without their voice when that's a big percentage of our Montbello and Green Valley Ranch population?" (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020). Ms. Bacon responded by explaining her dedication to community-led action and noted: "I've had a few opportunities in the last weeks to speak with Spanish-speaking parents. The truth of the matter is different communities engage differently. We need to actually go out to versus say they come to us" (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020). In explaining who she had spoken to in Montbello, she only referenced the meeting that she had attended with our research team:

I was on a call with 5 or 6 parents with Keisha. They told me, here is what we want to see in a leader. A lot of that or most of it, you see here [in the meeting]. A leader who understands our language, our culture, and most importantly, our kids. Someone who invests in their hopes and dreams (fieldnotes, October 21, 2020).

In our next research meeting, where we debriefed the latest Reimagining Montbello meeting, the mothers reflected on Ms. Bacon's answer. At first, they expressed gratitude that district officials were discussing how to engage the Latino community. However, they realized that the only concrete example of engagement with the Latino community was the conversation with our own

research group. I also noticed in Ms. Bacon's comments that the only name she mentioned was Keisha's: the only person at our small meeting that did not speak Spanish. The mothers then paused to consider a harder question: what effect—if any—was their participation and advocacy having on the district process? Jaqui shared that she was sad to see how they were the only example of engagement with Latino immigrants. As she noted, she was working hard to make sure that the Latino voice—in general—was heard, not just the voices of our group (fieldnotes, November 5, 2020). Here, the mothers reflected that they may have to strategize about how to ensure that the *community* was being empowered, not just them. This experience—of being highlighted in a public meeting—also led the mothers to reflect on how their efforts and voices were possibly being *used*, or lifted up as an example of engagement, in the absence of real, sustained efforts to connect to the Montbello Latino community.

In part because of these reflections, the mothers decided that they wanted to pursue other venues—outside of district meetings—to make the interests of Latino families more visible. Here, we strategized about ways to speak to the media to communicate the mothers' vision for the new high school to a larger audience. Through my research, I had been able to connect with Melanie Asmar, a local Chalkbeat reporter. After our conversation, I reached out to her to invite her to one of our meetings and framed this as a group interview with the five mothers. Asmar spent an hour with our group asking questions, promising that she was writing an article about community engagement and debate about the new comprehensive high school. The mothers were excited to see their vision covered in the press but were disappointed in the subsequent article. The published article focused on the district's recent announcement that they were moving forward on the comprehensive high school and only included one short quote from the group interview with our team:

However, some parents in the neighborhood say their voices haven't been heard.

Lorena's<sup>22</sup> children attend one of the small schools on the Montbello campus. She and other Spanish-speaking parents said they feel left out of the decision-making process.

Some didn't learn about the plan until recently, even though meetings have been taking place for years. "There is always another person making decisions about our children,"

Lorena said (Asmar, September 2020).

While Asmar noted their concern about being left out of the decision-making process, the mothers expressed disappointment that more of their opinions were not published. I suggested that they could talk to Donna Garnett, the editor for the Montbello MUSE, the local magazine. In a previous conversation, she had offered to write an article about their viewpoints on the planned high school or give us space to describe our work. Based on our previous experiences, I suggested that the mothers might be able to write the article themselves, and Donna Garnett offered to publish this article in MUSE. The mothers decided to do so, as a way of being in more control of their narrative. Our collaboratively written article was published in November of 2020. While brief, the article, "Mothers of DCIS: Reimagining our School/ Madres de DCIS: Reimaginando Nuestra Escuela," highlighted our research group and included direct narratives from three of the mothers in our group. The mothers shared "values we feel should be reflected in the school," in an effort to make sure that the "Latino community can be seen as a valued stakeholder in Montbello schools" (Contreras, 2020).

The mothers' frustrations with the initial interview—and subsequent efforts—were another kind of pause, asking them to reflect on the question: how could their narrative be shared widely without alteration? It led our group to seek out other opportunities to tell our own story

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<sup>22</sup> Name has been changed to a pseudonym.

and led us to be more cautious—and strategic—in subsequent contacts with journalists. Recently in February 2021, Melanie Asmar asked for another interview with the mothers. Lorena, with the benefit of our group’s reflection, noted, “He estado pensando, y creo que sí deberíamos de hablar con ella pero con una condición. Que ella escriba más sobre nuestras opiniones y del grupo. [I have been thinking, and I think that we should talk to her but with one condition. That she writes more about our opinions and of the group.] (fieldnotes, February 18, 2020). In our next meeting, she underscored this point, and proposed the idea of conditions to the group:

Sí, como les estoy diciendo, hay que tomarlo como una responsabilidad y pues...A mí me gustaría darle la entrevista siempre y cuando ella publique el artículo con lo que nosotros hablamos con ella. Porque si ella va a poner lo que ella quiere y no lo que nosotros hablamos, entonces qué caso tiene de hacer esa entrevista. [Yes, like I am telling you, we should take this up as a responsibility and well...I would like to give her the interview as long as she publishes the article with what we said to her. Because if she is going to put what she wants and not what we said, well what’s the use in doing the interview.] (focus group).

The rest of the mothers agreed with Lorena and the second interview took place on February 26, 2021; we are expecting to see the published article soon. Through these interactions, the mothers learned about the importance of maintaining control over their narrative, and as a result, the importance of seeking more control over their advocacy efforts. In these small ways, the group sought to take back some of the autonomy over their research and advocacy efforts; an autonomy that had been lost as they were asked to respond to district initiatives, rather than focus on practices in their own school community.

Throughout their research and advocacy work, the mothers were able to reframe their research goals and action plans. In the face of district policy shifts, they constructed new strategies to meet their community's needs and responded to new challenges. Here, I argue that our group's setbacks—the district's initiative for a comprehensive high school and the pandemic—were not solely repressive; these obstacles enabled the mothers to take action and collaboratively responded to the changed landscape of educational reform in their community. Moreover, such challenges also led the mothers to pause and reflect on their own learning. These pauses provided a new lens for the mothers to reflect on their agency, the structures that limited and marginalized them, and how they might circumvent these structures to accomplish their goals. Furthermore, these pauses became powerful learning moments, particularly as the mothers were prompted to reflect on their experiences and analyze why they were experiencing these barriers. What made these pauses truly powerful was that the mothers had the space to reflect on these events and experiences *collectively*. In the next section, I describe how our research group created spaces for collective reflection.

### **Shared Reflection**

One Friday evening in February, Madres de DCIS met for our *plática* on their experiences on being a part of our PAR group as well as to debrief their recent experiences in trying to shape the “Reimagining Montbello” process. Lorena, Teresa, Ms. Marta, and Juana's son submitted applications to serve on a principal selection committee for the new comprehensive high school and middle school. They were accepted and participated in interviews with principal candidates. In this Friday Madres de DCIS meeting, these mothers discussed their experiences participating in this committee. Lorena and Marta both shared how the comments and actions of others in the committee led them to feel silenced and overlooked.



The other mothers shared the *desilusión* they felt as they listened to their experiences. After listening to Lorena, Denise spoke up:

Me impacta que Lorena diga que que ella está cansada de tanto trabajar porque no nos valoran y ella tiene muchos años trabajando en esto de servicio a la comunidad y estar investigando y participando en muchas reuniones, muchas organizaciones, muchos comités. Porque yo también he estado en el grupo de FACE (Family and Community Engagement Office) y nuestra voz no se escucha. Entonces digo, si ella que está más preparada que yo.... [It impacts me that Lorena says that she is tired of working so much because they don't value us and she has spent many years working in this service to the community, doing research, participating in many meetings, many organizations, many committees. Because I have also been in the FACE (Family and Community Engagement Office) and our voice isn't heard. So I say, if she is more prepared than me....] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Denise trailed off after this comment, hinting at her doubt that she—who had far less experience in advocacy work than Lorena, who has worked as Montbello conectora and organizer for many years—would be able to make an impact with her participation.

The focus group continued voicing their *desilusión* with the district decision-making forums. Lorena echoed these concerns, sharing an experience during the principal candidate selection process, where a comment from a community leader left her feeling censored and powerless. As part of this committee's discussions, Lorena had posed a possible question to ask candidates. But here, as Lorena recalled, the community leader said that the question was too long, and that if Lorena posed it in Spanish to later translate into English, it would confuse the candidate. Lorena reported that she felt silenced. As she expressed, “En pocas palabras me estaba

diciendo: qué estoy haciendo aquí, [In a few words, she was telling me: what am I doing here,” (fieldnotes, February 18, 2021). Lorena stressed that this comment made her feel that she did not belong in the committee, and that her immediate response was wanting to log off of the meeting. However, she shared with me that the comment also made her think, “Mi voz tiene poder. Quería salir, pero aquí está mi lugar y yo me quedé. [My voice has power. I wanted to leave, but my place was here and I stayed.]” (fieldnotes, February 18, 2021). She still refused to only pose the question in English after someone sent her the translated version of her question, which she originally had posed in Spanish, in the chat. As she noted: “Lo puedo en inglés, pero no. Lo voy a decir en español porque tengo todo el derecho. [I can do it in English, but no. I’m going to say it in Spanish because I have that right.]” (fieldnotes, February 18, 2021). At this point, in recounting this experience to the whole group, she turned and directed her comments towards me, saying:

Cuando yo me sentía—así como cuando no pude hacer la pregunta en español—me sentí defraudada. Pero al momento que yo le dejé ver mi sentir a usted, usted me dijo algunos comentarios donde a mí también me dio valor y decir: sí, tiene razón, yo voy a seguir. Voy a seguir. Entonces este grupo me ayudó a mí como a reflexionar un poco más y me da poder este grupo de que todos pasamos por estas cosas. [When I felt—like when I couldn’t ask the question in Spanish—I felt let down. But in the moment that I let you know how I felt to you, you told me some things that gave me courage and to say: yes, you are right, I will go on. I will go on. So, this group has helped me to reflect a little more and this group gives me power in that all of us go through these things.] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Here, Lorena was referencing a conversation that we had over the phone the previous day when she called to share her doubts about participating in the selection committee. As she mentioned, we discussed her roles in the committee and in our PAR group and she shared how she felt the group had given her strength. Lorena's comment in the focus group also shifted the tone of our meeting. Our conversation had started with surfacing the multiple aspects of the mothers' *desilusión* with the school design process. With Lorena's comment, the mothers shared a more positive outlook about their experiences and their possible successes, pointing to other ways how our group had shaped their understanding of themselves and their work to influence their community. Lorena's comments—noting how the group has given her “power,” and an awareness that “all of us go through these things”—illustrate the importance of shifts in self-perception. Dyrness (2011) argues such shifts in perception are an essential part of social transformation: a process that is “as much personal as political,” underscoring the “third-world feminist insight that in order to transform social structures, we must first transform ourselves” (p. 163).

Furthermore, the group's time together sharing, laughing, and expressing their concerns—even when the group moved online—led to *convivencia* between the mothers. This *convivencia*, or “being together,” fomented relationships “built through the sharing of daily struggles and victories,” (Dyrness, 2011, p. 25). In these ways, I began to see our research group as facilitating the development of *autoformación* among the mothers. Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) describe *autoformación* as a process of collective “self-formation and self-directed learning” (p. 184). Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) use this term when exploring how “transnational women educate themselves to become activists and what meanings they make of their own transnational identities,” (p. 184). In this sense, Madres de DCIS also educated

themselves to become activists and community leaders as they navigated their own identities and roles within DCISM and the school district decision-making processes. I argue that this reflection also led to a clarity on the purpose and power of our space as we planned future steps for our group.

### **Rethinking and Reframing Success**

As our mothers shared their notions of success in our February *plática*, they highlighted how the group became a source of their strength. Here, I describe three of the central lessons/outcomes that mothers identified from our work: learning about the structures of power within the education system, accompanying each other as they navigated the education system, and reframing setbacks as opportunities for learning. I draw on these points to reframe notions of success. In particular, I argue that we should not evaluate the success of research collectives by their concrete “wins” in various organizing campaigns. The mothers were not, ultimately, that successful in integrating themselves into existing systems of power or shaping district priorities around the new school. Yet, I argue that the mothers valued the PAR group as a space of collective investigation, where they could share their experiences, learn from one another, and move towards a critical consciousness.

First, the mothers discussed how sharing experiences with the group has taught them about structures of power within the education system. As the mothers shared the barriers they faced and how they navigated them, they compared and analyzed the similarities and differences in their experiences. This analysis led them to question the structures that shaped those experiences. Denise, a Central American mother, expanded on this point during our *plática*, contrasting her previous involvement in school decisions with her growing awareness of other aspects of education:

En estas conversaciones, estaba escuchando a las demás que tienen más experiencia y más conocimiento que yo, que han tenido muchas charlas y reuniones. Para mi estas charlas que estoy teniendo cada viernes que nos reunimos, aprendo más y me entero que realmente yo estaba prácticamente en cero. Como vacía, sin información, como realmente al fondo de todo es el sistema educativo. Y yo solo lo conocía como por encima. Y sé que muchos padres están así como yo estaba, pensando que sí lo sabemos todo. Y ahora me doy cuenta de que si van a escoger un director o lo quitan o lo ponen, a nosotros no nos toman en cuenta. [In these conversations, where I listened to what the rest with more experience than me and more knowledge, that they have had many talks and meetings. For me these talks that I am participating in every Friday that we meet, I learn more and I realize that I truly was practically at a zero. Like empty, without information, how really deep all of this education system goes. And I only knew it from the surface. And I know that many parents are how I was, thinking that we do know it all. And now I realize that if they are going to choose a principal or take him away or instate one, we are not taken into consideration] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Denise demonstrates that before her participation in this group, she believed herself to be deeply engaged in her child's education by attending school and district events. However, in conversation with the other mothers during our meetings, she realized there were other ways to be involved. These conversations also led her to distrust the information provided by the district. Here, Denise referenced her growing skepticism of how research was used by the district to advance certain priorities. She explained how the district's use of survey data, specifically in a survey measuring the community's desire to open a comprehensive high school, deserved to be examined more closely and critically:

Y [el distrito] dice la mayoría—¿la mayoría de cuánto? Dicen la mayoría de las encuestas, dijeron que el 80% votaron por sí. ¿Y cuánto es el 80%? ¿30 padres? ¿De cuántos estudiantes, 200, 300, 500 estudiantes? Entonces, así de esa manera nos van engañando. Y ahora ya sé que no basta solamente estar presente en las reuniones y conocer al director, sino estar tratando desde más a fondo. [And [the district] says the majority—the majority of how much? They say the majority of the surveys, they said that 80% of people voted yes. And how much is 80%? 30 parents? From how many students? 200, 300, 500 students? So, in that way, they continue to lie to us. And now I know that it is not enough to only be present in the meetings and to get to know the principal, but to also be working from deeper inside] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Here, Denise refers to a neighborhood survey commissioned by DPS citing that 85% of community members supported the return to a comprehensive high school in Montbello and 78% were in support of consolidating existing schools to create this high school (Keating Research, 2020). The study, one of many the district conducted to understand community perspectives on Montbello schools, was conducted by an external evaluation group and included 472 survey respondents. Through our conversations, which increasingly focused on debriefing district meetings, we were able to raise critical questions about the information presented by the district. In the case of the survey, the mothers—as Denise recalled—were critical of this effort, as insufficiently representative of the community. Through our collective dialogue, Denise learned to distrust the district and grasped a clearer concept of the structures of the education system.

Here, the mothers highlighted how their awareness of larger structures of power had taken shape *through* our group's conversations. In this respect, I see the conversations as analogous to the kinds of learning that Dyrness and Sepulveda (2020) profile across their

research contexts in Northern California, San Salvador, and Madrid. According to their research, the youth they worked with expressed they did not have opportunities in schools to share their experiences of migration and issues related to their identities or race. As they argue, “Without these opportunities, without the space to build community around their shared experiences, they had no support for developing the critical consciousness that was naturally emerging from their experiences in transnational social fields” (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 225). Our research space also served a similar purpose. Throughout our *plática*, Denise referred to how the Friday conversations helped her to “learn more”; this learning led her to critique the districts’ decision-making tools, which—for Denise—was a part of the district’s “lie.” Building community through these shared spaces allowed for a critical consciousness to develop as the mothers—like Denise—shared their experiences of navigating these parent engagement efforts and began an analysis of how these policies and practices served to marginalize them.

Second, the research space motivated the mothers to accompany each other throughout the research process and in their advocacy work. As described, the mothers saw the group as a space where they learned from and guided each other through *convivencia*. Through their relationships, the mothers inspired each other to continue their work, even when feeling *desilusión*. Ms. Marta, the staff member, also accompanied the mothers. In many of our meetings, she helped the mothers navigate the complicated education system, pointing them to the correct person for assistance or to voice their concerns. In one meeting, she encouraged the mothers to share their experiences on remote learning with each other so that they would realize that it doesn’t happen to only them (fieldnotes, November 20, 2020). Much of her participation added to the knowledge that was generated in this group. By building close relationships to school faculty like Ms. Marta, the mothers crossed the hierarchical boundaries that separate them

from direct sources of school power. Therefore, the mothers have seen her as a sort of border broker. But, in our focus group, Ms. Marta stressed that she also learned from the mothers:

Yo por mi parte digo que a mí me ha ayudado a entender más a los padres y a saber que la batalla que ellos llevan es grande. Podemos hacer mucho, pero no estar unidos...es diferente. Solo que sí entiendo más estas batallas y todo. Quiero seguir para ver en qué modo les pueda ayudar y trabajar con ustedes. [For my part, I say that it has helped me to understand parents more and to know the battles that they take with them are big. We can do a lot, but not being united...it's different. It's just that I understand the battles and all. I want to continue to see in what way I can help and work with you all] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Here, Ms. Marta points to how the mothers have accompanied *her* as they have taught her about parents' "battles" and how she can do more to address their needs. She is an example of how border brokers who participate in spaces of dialogue may learn more about how to accompany others.

Through my work with the mothers, I also became a border broker. In my intentional efforts to provide a safe space where the mothers could share personal experiences, I was able to support and guide their work. As described in Chapter 2, I have gone through schooling experiences similar to those of their children and intimately understand the sacrifices that immigrant parents have made for their children. These experiences, coupled with my thorough knowledge of the American school system and of conducting research, positioned me as a border broker. I accompanied the Madres de DCIS in investigating their school and community and acting to transform their opportunities and experiences. I especially perceived this when Lorena asked hesitantly at the end of the focus group:



Ahora que su papá...no sabemos lo que va a pasar con la reelección del director. Yo quiero saber si usted va a seguir trabajando con nosotras en este grupo. ¿O deberíamos de tomar nosotros el liderazgo de seguir este grupo sin usted? [Now that your dad...we don't know what is going to happen with the reelection of the principal. I want to know if you will continue to work with us in this group. Or should we take leadership of continuing this group without you?] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

I assured them that I would continue to work with them and that the end of my own research would not affect the work I was doing with them. This is one instance—among others—where I came to see my work as more than facilitation and more than research. Ultimately, I had become a kind of border broker, a researcher and emerging scholar surviving and transcending colonial wounds. To commit to this identity meant “stepping up” (Ventura & Wong, 2019). I strived to do this throughout the research process, especially after the onset of Covid-19 when many mothers saw more barriers to participation: I took notes for the mothers during our online meetings, set up Zoom meetings and invitations, translated during meetings with district officials and reporters, and registered them for public online district meetings that often had complicated registration procedures and required several online steps. Being a border broker also meant challenging hierarchies in school systems. For example, I experienced a conflict with the DCISM parent liaison who wished to use the mothers’ research time to meet school engagement goals. I also used my graduate program connections to investigate how to circumvent university policies that threatened to prevent the mothers from being compensated for their work.

Just as important, the mothers accompanied me. Through our work, these mothers allowed me to feel at home in several aspects of my life, including my pregnancy and my new motherhood. I became a mother in their presence and with their guidance. The mothers also

accompanied me as I struggled—at several points throughout the pandemic—to keep up our group’s momentum. The mothers taught me that, sometimes, listening is the most powerful act our group could engage in: I learned about their struggle for belonging, the transnational tools and perspectives they valued, and their hopes and concerns for their children and their families. These close relationships guided us in our research, advocacy work, and our lives. Here, my experiences echoed those of Dyrness and Sepulveda (2020), who reflected on what they gained through their collaborative research with transnational young people: “while we sought to understand their experiences and accompany them through our research, they accompanied us in our struggle to feel at home in Madrid” (p. 221).

Finally, the group also learned to see obstacles not as failures, but as “pauses,” and opportunities to reflect on their own learning. Lorena expressed this well, explaining how she was able to move past the *desilusión* of not achieving their goals:

Entonces como que ya tenemos inquietudes y queremos saber qué pasa. Para mí es un logro. Entonces creo que estamos bien dentro de lo poco que estamos...estamos desilusionados pero creo que para mí estamos bien en ese punto. [So it’s like we now have concerns and we want to know what is happening. For me that is an achievement. So I think that we are good within the small...we are disappointed but I think that for me, we are good on that point] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Here, Lorena points to how moments of *desilusión* led the group to analyze structural barriers. She frames this analysis—an awareness of their concerns, and a drive to know more—as a significant and worthy achievement, particularly in light of a narrative of “lack of engagement” from the Latino community.

Ultimately, this research space gave way to conversations that served to challenge each other, learn from each other, *and* give each other hope. Towards the end of our focus group, Isabel—a mother who barely spoke up during the meetings—succinctly summarized the group’s comments and described how this group served as a space for the mothers to navigate their experiences within Montbello’s education system. Isabel’s comments—rare, and powerful—are worth quoting at length. She shared:

Yo—como saben—soy muy callada, muy tímida, porque no me es fácil. Pero yo desde que inicié las reuniones con ustedes, usted [Ana] y la Sra. Juana, creo que íbamos muy bien. Estábamos haciendo las encuestas tratando de que los padres se involucraran, buscando la forma de comunicarse con maestros, alumnos, padres. El director principalmente siempre estuvo ahí para apoyarnos. Yo creo que eso es un gran logro que tenemos. Que desgraciadamente, pues por equis razón ya, pues si la escuela ya no va a estar, entonces yo pienso que el director dejó todo lo que él tenía. Lo que él pudo lo dejó, lo va a dejar en la escuela para beneficio de los estudiantes. Y si los estudiantes están bien, pues los padres también. Ahora de los maestros, yo pienso que también íbamos en muy buen camino, nada más que por el cambio de edificio y todo, como dijo la Sra. Juana, retrocedimos. A lo mejor no retrocedimos. En mi punto de vista, a lo mejor nos estancamos. Ya no conseguimos lo que queríamos de seguir en el proyecto de involucrar a más padres. Pero creo que estamos ahí nada más esperando el semáforo verde para seguir. Y si nosotros como madres de familia, padres de familia nos decepcionamos, yo creo que ahí sí retrocedemos y no conseguimos lo que queremos para nuestros hijos. Y pues sí es un gran éxito lo que logramos en las pocas reuniones que tuvimos con los maestros. Pero, vamos por muy buen camino. Y sobre lo del edificio, pues

lamentablemente me decepcioné porque como dijo Lorena, a veces como que no nos hacen sentir que no debemos estar donde estamos. Pero un éxito también grande es el que ya se dieron cuenta. Que no estamos dormidos. Estamos despertando y eso es un gran logro. Y como dijo María, también la unión hace la fuerza. Y no hay que mirar para atrás, solo para adelante y por el bien de nuestros hijos. Y muchas gracias a usted [Ana], que también sin usted, yo pienso que no estuviéramos dónde estamos, ni hubiéramos logrado lo que hemos logrado. [I—like you know—am very quiet and timid, because it's not easy for me. But since I began attending the meetings with you, with you [Ana and Ms. Juana], I think we were doing very well. We were doing the surveys, trying to get parents more involved, and looking for ways to communicate with teachers, students, and parents. First of all, the principal was always there to support us. I think that was a big achievement that we have. That unfortunately, well for whatever reason, if the school will no longer be there, then I think that the principal left everything he had there. Everything that he could do, he left there. He will leave it for the benefit of the students. And if the students are well, the parents are too. Now for the teachers, I think we were doing we were on the right track there too, just with the change of building and all, like Ms. Juana said, we went backwards. But maybe we didn't go backwards. In my opinion, maybe just stalled. We didn't achieve what we wanted to in the project of engaging more parents. But I think that we are just waiting for the green light to continue our work. And if we, as parents, feel hopeless, I think that that's where we go backwards and don't achieve what we want for our children. And I think it is a big success what we were able to accomplish in the few meetings that we had with teachers. But we are on the right track. And about the building, unfortunately, I felt disappointed because like Lorena said, sometimes they

make us feel like we shouldn't be where we are. But another big accomplishment is that we have started to notice. We are not asleep. We are awakening and that is a big achievement. And like Denise said, being unified creates strength. And we don't have to look back, only forward and for the benefit of our children] (focus group, February 19, 2021).

Isabel built on the other mothers' comments and reflections, extending them, and encouraging the others to see the value in their work. After noting some of the concrete successes the group had in their school community, she acknowledged their setbacks, especially their inability to change the district's move back to a comprehensive high school in Montbello. She ends by echoing some of the earlier comments, noting that one of their more significant accomplishments is a growing awareness of the problems they face. As she recalled, "...we have started to notice. We are not asleep. We are awakening and that is a big achievement." She also marks space for hope and for future advocacy work. Isabel's comments summarized the roller coaster of emotions that the mothers felt in this process. She points to the *desilusión* and the hope they discovered in their collective reflection as they paused after each barrier to find a way forward.

These opportunities for *convivencia*, learning about dominant systems and structures, and movement towards a critical consciousness was enabled through *acompañamiento*, where the mothers acted as border brokers through their research and advocacy work. These successes were generated *through* the research process. Since the mothers felt less progress through their participation in formal district decision-making processes, I question whether integrating marginalized parents into existing systems of power may facilitate liberatory goals for communities. Dyrness (2008) argues that there is a "distinct privileging of activist research that seeks changes in the legal realm (new public policies, or new rights and resources for

underprivileged groups) at the expense of exploring other kinds of changes that research might promote,” (p. 23). This leads researchers to target their research towards “specific, winnable policy changes,” (Dyrness, 2008, p. 23). Even in approaches that pay “expert attention to relationship building and power,”—such as in Hong’s (2011) study in a Chicago neighborhood—the focus is on developing low-income, non-English speaking parents into advocates, leaders, and role models (p. 5). For Hong (2011), an ecology of parent engagement creates a culture change, but more importantly, serves “a broader purpose of replenishing new participation and leadership.” (p. 205). She emphasizes that engagement approaches should encourage “sharing leadership and power with parents” for them to develop and exercise their leadership skills (Hong, 2011, p. 31). Although this approach can certainly transform our schools—and can be seen in DCISM through the parent advisory and SAB meetings—Dyrness highlights how change that occurs *through* and as part of the participatory research process, might be a valuable outcome in itself. She argues that as, “participants develop critical awareness of the historical and material conditions that limit their lives, they are moved to change them,” (Dyrness, 2011, p. 205). Like Dyrness describes, Lorena, Jaqui, and Teresa’s experiences organizing and working in Montbello allowed them to reflect on their experiences in the “in-between,” and through their conversations, guided others like Denise in their exploration of their roles and understanding of the educational context in Montbello. Moreover, it inspired these less experienced mothers to continue advocacy work, despite the negative experiences they may have had in district-sponsored processes. In other words, through this reflection and sharing, Lorena, Jaqui, and Teresa realized their border broker potential as they guided others, provided space for other mothers to participate in ways that made them feel like they belonged, as well as pushed these mothers to a more nuanced critique of structures in their discussions. Similar to Mr. Silva,

Lorena, Jaqui, and Teresa’s profound transnational experiences and networks offered resources that allowed them to guide the rest of the mothers in their groups. Ultimately, this research space became a space where *autoformación* fomented “a new space for belonging, a source of identity that fueled and sustained their engagement in the public sphere,” (Dyrness, 2016, p. 12).

After our reflection during the *plática*, the mothers discussed their next steps and goals. Several mothers, like Lorena and Teresa, stated that they would continue with their organizing work outside of the group. For example, Lorena applied—and was accepted—to be a part of the school design committee for the new comprehensive high school. However, the group itself would hone in on what they felt was the most powerful aspect: reflection and collective learning. The mothers decided that they would invite other parents to this shared space to learn with them. Our group decided to hold a series of *pláticas* for Spanish-speaking parents to share their experiences during the pandemic and possible concerns about remote learning and their child’s social emotional health. Although our first few sessions saw few new participants, the mothers are hopeful that more parents will want to join our online *pláticas*.

These efforts may veer away from the trend in parent engagement literature that aims to empower parents through institutional organizing and decision-making. However, as the mothers have shown in Madres de DCIS, having a parallel space where they can organize, *convivir*, and work towards their actions for change in schools can also be powerful. The mothers seek to work with other border brokers—like Mr. Silva and Ms. Melendez—as well as with other parents, to make an impact in their community through their own forms of advocacy. Through this research space, and through the relationships built with other border brokers in DCISM, the mothers were able to move towards building community and a sense of belonging that embraced their transnational identities and perspectives.

## Conclusion

My dissertation positions Montbello as a particularly vivid case of how neoliberal urban policies, working in tandem with education reforms, have reshaped communities, exacerbated racial divisions and deepened distrust in public institutions. While scholars have documented the harmful effects of market-oriented reforms in urban communities, I shift our focus to what happens *after* such reforms have been implemented. To explore these reforms, I center our attention on the Denver Center for International Studies-Montbello (DCISM), a small school of choice serving newcomer immigrant families in Montbello. This school is a product of marketized reforms, but also subject to them. By centering DCISM, this critical ethnography illustrates the challenges of creating a cohesive community and spaces of belonging in schools in the wake of fragmentation, divisions, and distrust. I attempt to demonstrate how building this space of belonging, especially for newcomer families, can be done through decolonized, humanizing *pedagogies of acompañamiento* that welcomes the transnational identities and perspectives of these communities.

I conclude this study by pointing to some considerations for educational practice, policy and research. I first discuss the implications of this study for school districts and school leaders in thinking about how to define and facilitate community engagement. I then turn to the potential implications for educational practice, specifically about the design of engagement practices that seek to improve school/community relationships, especially with marginalized and immigrant parents. While I highlight how *pedagogies of acompañamiento* can create spaces for these parents, I also caution that they should not be operationalized. I suggest that structural changes can be made in district policies and practices—as well as in schools—to create the space for relationship-building and reflection, although without trying to systemically reproduce



relationships. Some of these structural changes include moves towards equitable collaborations that encourage expanded ideals and models of parent leaders. I also shed light on methodological considerations for future research. I argue that certain approaches to research can also facilitate *acompañamiento*, as co-researchers accompany each other into new, more critical forms of consciousness about themselves and their communities.

### **Holistic Approaches to Defining “Community”**

As I have demonstrated through this study, communities like Montbello are shaped by multiple, complex historical and sociopolitical factors. This study points to urban and school policies, as well as racialized divisions, that have led to fragmentation and complicated how residents understand goals for their neighborhood schools. Communities like Montbello, however, are seldom monolithic, and rarely have unified visions. As policy makers and educational leaders seek to understand community interactions and relationships, they must take up multifaceted, multi-textured views of community. In this study, I highlight how focusing on the collision of communities and residents’ migration stories is essential to understanding the nuances *within* communities. Because migration and gentrification are two phenomena occurring across the U.S. and possibly globally, this research might suggest how school leaders and districts can design ways for diverse communities to find belonging in contested spaces.

Furthermore, a deeply historical approach is needed to understand current community dynamics. In the case of Montbello, the history of the community, as well as the history of the schools, influenced present-day discussions around community identity and its community schools. Particularly central is the legacy of Montbello High School and its unifying potential; without an understanding of the importance of this institution, current conversations and controversies over Montbello neighborhood schools may seem out of place.

Finally, understanding how race—*as well as* language, culture, and migration—impacts community interactions and relationships, is essential in understanding the communities that schools are situated in. Although interactions in Montbello were largely understood through a racial lens, I explored how cultural and linguistic differences shaped the differing perspectives and experiences in Montbello schools. This investigation provided a more nuanced and complex understanding of these divisions: how language was a barrier to building connections and how cultural practices—welcoming to some—alienated others. Through a lens that recognizes the impact of cultural and linguistic differences, we may be better situated to question how a purely racialized lens may lead to the perception of competing visions among Montbello stakeholders. Furthermore, this lens can help to move us away from progressive ideas of diversity that still center whiteness and demonstrate the possibilities for decentering whiteness in community ideals for diversity.

Without such deeply contextual and historical views, school districts and school leaders may face challenges in designing appropriate approaches to relationship-building. Some of these challenges are reflected in recent district efforts to return to a comprehensive high school. These efforts were a response—a decade later—to address the harms and distrust created by the decision to close Montbello High School. Although surveys, polls, and interviews with Montbello residents guided their decision to return to a comprehensive high school, they failed to consider other aspects of the community. Demographic changes, migration patterns, language barriers, and cultural practices have diversified educational needs and visions for Montbello schools. For the Latino immigrants at DCISM, the district’s move to close their school is another instance of a failed approach to build trust and relationships. Next, I point to how these

understandings of community can help to create multifaceted approaches to engagement that have the potential to affirm the identities and perspectives of all families.

### **Engagement as a Medium for Belonging**

In light of the above considerations of community, it may be ineffective—and indeed, counterproductive—for a district or a school to design one approach to community engagement. In this study, I detail how schools are situated within communities and profoundly shaped by them. This also means treating schools as centers of community, as institutions that cannot be removed from this context. Furthermore, *families* are also situated within communities (Hong, 2011). Therefore, family engagement *and* community engagement go hand in hand; engagement approaches must be designed to reflect community *and* families’ needs and strengths.

Especially in the context of distrust and school faculty turnover, I point to the importance of *listening*. As demonstrated in this study, successful engagement practices—as well as humanizing and decolonial pedagogies that focus on relationship-building—begin with listening and understanding. As Sepúlveda (2011) argues, the call to act and engage in these pedagogies “by creating alternative spaces for a different kind of learning and engagement,” stemmed from a deep sense of empathy (p. 559). Although I contend that school districts should not seek to narrowly “operationalize” these pedagogies, I argue that certain structural changes may create space for the manifestation of *pedagogies of acompañamiento* in schools. First, school districts and school faculty must strive to “get to know” the community/communities they are situated in through an ethnographic approach and ask purposeful questions about the goals and values of all involved. Ethnographic approaches to home visits may be one way to accomplish this goal. In their study on home visits, Whyte and Karabon (2016) guided teachers in incorporating ethnographic principles to learn about families’ cultural resources. They found that teachers

demonstrated awareness of “the boundary lines defining home–school relationships and how power impacted the decisions they made while attempting to reimagine their roles within these relationships,” (p. 217). These scholars demonstrate how an ethnographic approach allows educators to learn more about communities *and* question the assumptions and roles that shape interactions in schools. School districts may also move towards this more holistic understanding of communities through creating structured supports and time for historical investigations. Furthermore, school districts and leaders may collaborate with families, as well as community leaders and resources, to help school leaders learn about the context they will be immersed in. For example, school districts can engage in embedded and participatory research with students, parents, and community members. A participatory approach would facilitate a richer understanding of the community and complement existing methods of learning and collaborating with the community (e.g., surveys and polling). Partnering with local universities or community organizations can also provide schools with resources to guide school leaders in ethnographic research about the communities in which their schools are situated.

Second, educators should understand how personal identities—and how they are shaped by race, language, and culture—frame interactions within schools and neighborhoods. This understanding may help school districts and leaders build bridges with families of color and immigrant families. This study describes the centrality of the transnational identity of a school leader in shaping DCISM’s approach to engagement. I also demonstrate how school faculty’s backgrounds, identities, and experiences are central in their struggle to build partnerships and provide transformative experiences for marginalized communities. This finding indicates the importance of identity work by school leaders. Furthermore, this study may point to the dangers of focusing solely on designing sweeping, large-scale efforts for building relationships.

Educators engaging in small acts of reflection on their identity and how it influences their actions have the potential to improve relationship-building in schools. Therefore, school districts can provide space for identity work with all school leaders and teachers as they explore how their own identities shape their relationships.

Similarly, school districts must also consider how to nurture the growth of leaders of color who understand the potential of humanizing and decolonial pedagogies such as *pedagogies of acompañamiento*. As I have demonstrated, creating a border broker team that can engage in pedagogies of acompañamiento first requires more potential border brokers in schools. To achieve this, school districts can hire more immigrant educators and educators of color. This may look like creating “Grow Your Own” programs to recruit teachers directly from the communities they are serving and where locals can become educators in their own community schools. Furthermore, just as Mr. Silva had the power to create broader change within DCISM, more immigrant and leaders of color may potentially create welcoming spaces in their schools. School districts can facilitate the training of these educators to become school leaders, as well as create programs where existing school leaders can find and hire more immigrant (or children of immigrant) educators and educators of color. Investing in our marginalized communities also requires school leaders to recognize or compensate border brokers—including paraprofessionals, and other non-teaching staff like secretaries and counselors, who are often overlooked—for their labor and work in developing connections and relationships with students as they built a site of belonging (Ventura, 2020).

However, as I also argued, immigrant educators and educators of color are not automatically border brokers. Becoming a border broker necessitates a reflexivity and understanding that the “in-between” spaces, “produced by multiple exclusions” are “spaces of

possibility,” (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 118). Border brokers also engage in acts of subversion, challenging the marginalizing educational practices that threaten to dehumanize students (Sepúlveda, 2018). In this study, I highlight how border brokers can create spaces of *convivencia*, which, as Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) highlight, become a “means of affirming individual experiences, developing a critical analysis, and strengthening group identity” (p. 222). These spaces can also become places where *autoformación* can occur: as border brokers accompany others and encourage the “sharing of individual experiences of collective oppression”, they make space for both “personal and collective transformation” (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 188-189). Therefore, I call for school districts to prioritize engagement practices that seek to develop schools as sites of belonging. Through this approach, schools have the potential to become spaces where healing of divisions may—at the very least—begin. Building a team that engages in *pedagogies of acompañamiento* can allow for a transformation of educational spaces and of engagement practices.

School leaders can spur the development of *autoformación* and support border brokers by creating spaces that lend themselves to these dialogues. School leaders can achieve this through providing time and resources for immigrant educators and educators of color to share their experiences, explore their identities, and question the structures that shape their experiences and perspectives. Even more powerful, students and families can be invited to these spaces that support the sharing—and examination—of their roles and experiences. By doing so, educators build on the transnational tools and resources that families and communities members possess. For example, in my research, the mothers in our PAR group had extensive experience reaching out to build cross-cultural coalitions. As they felt welcomed and built relationships, many Latina mothers became more engaged in school activities and advocacy for their children. In these

engagement activities, they got to know African American parents and students and shared their stories with each other. These mothers can share and reflect on these experiences as they accompany other parents, students, and even faculty in their journey to build cross-cultural solidarity in DCISM. These mothers can act as border brokers to build this solidarity and lead the way for school faculty to begin to build those bridges as well.

Finally, this study points to the possibilities of a successful engagement approach. Current calls for reframing parent engagement draw on community-organizing models that strive to empower parents to be advocates and leaders in decision-making. These models have posed important considerations for schools and school districts. For example, parent and family engagement efforts should include avenues for parents to participate on their terms and have the autonomy to direct their actions and goals for their children and their schools. As the experiences of Madres de DCIS in DCISM's parent advisory and SAB meetings have shown, engagement efforts that strive to take up these equitable collaborations expand our models of leaders. But, these approaches to engagement might have some limitations. As the Madres de DCIS found, taking on leadership and advocacy roles often involves playing on an existing organizational field that does not allow parents to take substantive roles. Furthermore, relying on these types of engagement opportunities risks *using* or *tokenizing* their engagement, just as the Madres de DCIS experienced. In light of these experiences, I caution that these models of community organizing that target change through policy and formal decision-making may also be limited. I urge district and school leaders to not discount the ability of parents to define spaces of change and transformation that are meaningful to them, especially when they are outside of formal decision-making roles or outside of policy wins. I also urge stakeholders—when considering how to obtain access to power—to not only strive towards vertical power in existing institutions but look

to power horizontally: to other allied groups and their acts of resistance as they take their visions in their own directions, and possibly in solidarity with each other. By seeking to empower through this perspective and through this community approach, communities of color may continue to decenter whiteness and have an opportunity to implement their visions on their own terms.

### **Moving Towards Healing and Belonging**

In communities like Montbello, engagement efforts and relationship-building can move towards healing divisions and affirming transnational identities and experiences. As Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) argue, “Spaces and practices of *acompañamiento* in the borderlands open up new ways of being in our times, ways that resist the fragmentation, alienation, and hostility of our modern global era” (p. 235). Border broker leaders—who engage in *pedagogies of acompañamiento*—are particularly positioned to create these spaces. Communal spaces and *convivencia* created through dialogue and shared reflection can challenge traditional aims for engagement—like higher academic achievement and enrollment—and serve other, more humanizing purposes.

In light of these possibilities, district and school leaders must diversify their avenues for participation and attempt to embrace these conceptions of belonging. School leaders and faculty must be aware of the effects of their leadership and the potential of humanizing and decolonial approaches like *pedagogies of acompañamiento* to make a transformative impact as they walk *with* the communities they are serving. More importantly, leaders must be able to recognize spaces that are *already* building community and take up a concept of success that includes liberatory aims for community transformation. In this way, border broker educators and families can work together to create spaces of *acompañamiento* that help them to “navigate their



experiences of exclusion and broker hegemonic discourse that construct them as outsiders,” (Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020, p. 234). Therefore, district leaders must also provide flexibility for school leaders to create these spaces in their schools and to collaborate with those border brokers already engaging in these practices. This practice moves toward decentralizing engagement and would aim to provide leaders with the autonomy to lead their school as they listen to—and accompany—their community. Through these conceptions of relationship-building, these leaders might embrace, “the ambiguity of transnational belonging as a site for new democratic citizen formations” (Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2019, p. 10). As these spaces are created, we might open possibilities for a transformed sense of community and for democratic social change.

### **Community and Politically Engaged Research**

This study also demonstrates the rich knowledge that is produced through intertwining ethnographic research and PAR approaches. In my research with Madres de DCIS, the mothers’ identities and perspectives opened new avenues of investigation and contributed to “thicker” understandings of community and school dynamics. With the mothers, we explored how district efforts designed to collaborate with the Montbello community still marginalized Latino immigrants, and how narratives of community identity were reinforced through the media. Throughout my work with the mothers, we also uncovered opportunities for contributing to decision-making in formal district avenues, as well as language and navigational challenges that limited the roles that parents could take up. I could not have arrived at these understandings without the PAR component. Moreover, our collective reflections led to deeper understandings of *how* belonging takes shape. This research acted in service of communal goals for the transformation of Montbello schools and the humanization and empowerment of the Latino immigrant community in Montbello. In striving to meet these goals, our work highlighted the

mothers' production of knowledge and "repurposed" our research into a tool where immigrants can understand their lives as framed within structures and where "they can apply that lens to resist in their own lives" (Abrego, 2020, p. 17). Lastly, through our advocacy work, our research directly impacted the Montbello community and many Latino immigrants.

This attention to community and their goals also calls for researchers to develop *politicized trust* and to "step up" when needed (Vakil et al., 2016; Ventura & Wong, 2019). Ventura and Wong (2019) suggest that, "educational institutions and scholars have a greater responsibility to acknowledge the daily pain and fear felt by marginalized communities, and also to work with those communities in their struggles for justice and liberation" (p. 2). They argue that as researchers they can never be detached and must be loyal to social, political, and ethical commitments. For those researchers working in and collaborating with marginalized communities, an exploration of their identities and positionality is necessary. Furthermore, knowing when and how to act or to "step up" can be a skill that researchers should develop as they explore their positionality (Green, 2014). These explorations—necessary before, during, and after the research process—requires researchers to consider political commitments, and to be comfortable in our efforts to accompany others—both in and outside of the research process.

### **Hope for the Future**

As many families and community members have expressed and demonstrated through their actions in this study, schools are vehicles for the hopes we have for our children and our communities. The weight and pressure of those hopes on our schools is quite significant. This study pushes back on some of the expectations we hold for our schools, as it sheds light on the complexities of unifying communities and developing schools as spaces of belonging. However, I also highlight what schools can accomplish, and the possibilities that lay in equitable

collaborations and in *pedagogies of acompañamiento*. As Ventura (2020) argued, “Now more than ever, a global pandemic and uprisings against systemic racism urge us to take a critical look at who is caring for our students—not just caring for their academic success, but caring for who they are, for their community and ancestral knowledge and histories, and for their dreams and aspirations” (p. 662). Nourishing our students *and* their families should be a priority for educators as we build communities that affirm our full identities and move towards a transformed democratic citizenship. Schools can help pave the way towards this healing and create the space for this transformation.

In my interview with Marjorie Ledell, a resident of Montbello in the 1970s, she concluded by reflecting on the cyclical nature of Montbello’s fight over schools. She stated, “But I’m pleased that the circle is going back because what that tells me is there’s still a quest for that kind of community that brings people together. And schools are a real catalyst in that” (M. Ledell, interview, February 5, 2021). Ledell points to the enduring hope for a unified community and the central role schools play in realizing these hopes. In Montbello, rebuilding trust in an ever-changing, fragmented community is a complicated and high-stakes challenge. Whether these possibilities will manifest into concrete successes remains to be seen, especially as Montbello moves forward with the development of its new comprehensive high school. However, the stories of Montbello, DCISM, and the various forms of organized resistance by Montbello parents, demonstrates that in embracing the challenge to develop schools as sites of belonging, schools can become *catalysts* for change.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Interview Questions

#### For School Leaders/School faculty

1. Why is parent engagement important for you as a school leader/faculty?
2. How do you understand the roles of parents in their child's education?
3. How do you understand the roles of parents and community members in school decision-making?
4. How do you see the present school-community relations?
5. What are some of the factors you feel are influencing these relationships?
6. I'm finding that distrust is a common pattern in Montbello, especially in the Reimagining Montbello conversation. Do you feel like the school faces pressure to build trust? Do you see that as your role?
7. How are you trying to improve school-community relations?
8. What are some of the strengths you are finding within the Montbello community?
9. What are some of the obstacles you are finding within the Montbello community?
10. What does your ideal school-community relationship look like?

#### For Parents

1. Can you tell me about your family's background? Where are you from and when did you come to the US? When and how did you arrive in Montbello?
2. Do you feel like Montbello is home to you/or like you belong in Montbello? Why or why not?
3. What makes/ would make Montbello feel like home, or like Montbello is your community?
4. Does the school play a role in helping you feel at home in Montbello?
5. Describe a typical interaction between you and school faculty.
6. Is being involved in your child's education important for you? Why or why not?
7. How are you involved in your child's education?
8. How does the school invite you to be engaged in your child's education?
9. Are there any barriers in the school or in the community that make engagement difficult for you?
10. What are some positive effects you see already occurring with the school's efforts to connect with the community?
11. What are some things the school still needs to work on to connect with the community?
12. Do you feel your role as a parent is valued by the school/district?
13. How would you change your role as a parent in your child's education?

For community members

1. How long have you lived/worked in Montbello?
2. What does Montbello mean to you? Do you feel like Montbello is home to you?
3. Given the distrust that many people have talked about in the Reimagining Montbello conversations, how do you feel that this distrust occurred?
4. How do you think the trust needs to be rebuilt?
5. Describe a typical interaction between public schools in this neighborhood and community members.
6. Do you feel your role as a community member in education is valued by the school/district?
7. What are some positive effects you see with the school's/district's efforts to connect with the community?
8. What are some things the school/district still needs to work on to connect with the community?
9. What is an ideal relationship you would like to see between the school and community?

## Appendix B

### Codes and Themes

Values in Education  
Transnational Tools  
Solutions  
School Choice  
Researcher Identity  
Importance of Leadership in Building Trust  
Immigrant Identity and Experience  
Ideal School/Community Relationship  
History and Legacy of Montbello  
Gentrification in Montbello  
Fragmentation  
Engagement Practices  
Divisions and Belonging within Latino community  
Distrust  
Covid-19  
CBR Process  
Building Trust  
Engagement Wins  
Black/Brown Divide  
Feeling/Sense of Belonging in Montbello  
Acompañamiento