

A Case Study of School-Linked, Collective Parent Engagement

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This article explores the social processes and outcomes associated with a school-linked, community-based program that successfully engages Latino parents and children in a low-income school community. Framed by an ethnographic, embedded case study design, the authors collected data from 32 Latino parents. The findings detail parents' experiences when first entering the neighborhood and how these experiences shape their engagement with other parents in the program and neighborhood community. We conclude that efforts engaging low-income parents as communities of practice hold special promise for reducing barriers to children's learning, especially when school leaders, community-based organizations, and social researchers leverage their resources and capital in ways that support parents' efforts, insights, and aspirations.

KEYWORDS: collective parent engagement, community engagement, parent involvement, parent engagement, school-family-community partnerships

As the number of ethnic, immigrant, and (often) undocumented Latino families continues to increase in urban communities, needs for innovations that involve and engage parents and entire families also are increasing. Unfortunately, the resource and service capacities of low-income schools

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and community agencies are becoming increasingly limited. Brought forth by an historic economic downturn, these resource constraints provide an additional set of barriers to already overburdened helping systems. These barriers include increased class sizes in many low-income schools and increased social service case loads in human service and child welfare agencies as well as layoffs, downsizing, and closures of community-based organizations (including law enforcement) that share joint responsibility for the welfare of low-income communities.

Persons familiar with schools that serve low-income communities can well imagine how these constraints and cutbacks might further exacerbate the broad challenges faced by low-income Latino families. Low-income Latino families, made vulnerable by persistent difficulties securing housing, transportation, healthcare, food, and employment-related resources, may experience these challenges in triplicate when schools have fewer fiscal, human, and instrumental resources at their disposal. Furthermore, when school resources are lacking, low-income Latino parents who struggle with language barriers may become particularly vulnerable, especially if parents cannot locate or access people with sufficient linguistic competence to communicate with them.

Although educators are seldom directly charged with meeting the social-economic challenges of families, the presence of family-level barriers and challenges often weighs heavily on them (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Berliner, 2006). As research indicates, absent consistent family access to needed social, cultural, health, and economic resources, low-income Latino children face several dire threats to their educational progress and welfare. Chief among these barriers and threats are high levels of family stress (Berliner, 2006), unsafe social and physical environments in the community (Shutz, 2006; Wacquant, 2003), elevated likelihood of illness and school absence (Rothstein, 2004), and increased risk for residential transience and school mobility (Shutz, 2006). To the extent that these conditions of hardship prevail, educational and social programs designed for low-income Latino children may be destined to fall short of their desired goals and potential (Anyon, 2005; Berliner, 2006).

For these reasons, studies that attend to how low-income school communities might address non-school-related barriers to learning remain a critical aspect of the current research conversation (Berliner, 2006; Shutz, 2006). Of particular need are studies that identify new organizational relationships and designs that can help school communities better respond to the strengths, needs, and challenges of vulnerable families (Keith, 1996). Ideally, such novel organizational relationships involve alternative interventions designed with sufficient breadth and scope to (a) enhance parent and child preparedness to engage with schools and other formal institutions and (b) help schools and other community serving organizations maximize their

social and human capital resources, especially when formal services and supports are in short supply.

The following case study of 32 Latino parents engaged in a community-based program was designed to attend to these objectives. At the center of our inquiry is a complex, relational program/intervention focused on collective parent engagement (e.g., Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). In contrast to programs that focus on individuals, this one was structured to organize and mobilize a network of vulnerable Latino parents in service of themselves, their children, and other families in the community. Significantly, this collective parent engagement program was implemented in a community-based organization with strong linkages to an elementary school. The underlying rationale was that improved outcomes for families, schools, and communities hinge on new institutional designs that connect the school with community agencies, families, and the neighborhood.

Our findings begin with the social-psychological and political constraints that hinder the initial engagement of Latino parents and families in schools and other formal institutions. We then detail how an organized and mobilized parent collective can leverage parents' experiences and indigenous expertise in ways that first benefit individual parents and children and then gradually extend outward to include broader community and school environments. Ultimately, our data indicate that the development of parent-led social networks have considerable potential to enhance outcomes across several social and institutional units of analysis, including parent and child preparedness to engage in school. Details of the program follow, starting with a theoretical rationale.

Need and Rationale

To date, Latino parent engagement has largely been conceptualized as parents' participation in school-focused activities (e.g., volunteering at school, improving relationships with teachers, helping with homework). This school-focused approach to parent engagement research and practice is often privileged because it is thought to represent the most proximal parent influence on children's academic achievement (Epstein, 2001; Jeynes, 2005). Recent quantitative research supports this proposition: Parent engagement in school-focused activity is strongly associated with children's academic achievement even when parents' ethnic and social class affiliations are controlled in research designs (e.g., Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005).

Because the association between school-focused parent engagement and children's academic outcomes is firmly established, today's research agenda can be expanded. The main questions now involve identifying and evaluating those settings that may lead to active, sustained parent engagement practices (e.g., Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George,

2004; Warren et al., 2009). These questions of setting remain salient because, in spite of decades of research and development in low-income school communities (e.g., Epstein, 2001), school-based programs have largely failed to reach their intended goal of engaging low-income parents (Shutz, 2006; Smrekar, 1994; Warren et al., 2009).

Barriers to School-Based Parent Engagement

The extant literature offers a host of rationales for the persistent lack of low-income parent engagement in schools and school-based programs. Some of these rationales involve schools directly, particularly when educators perceive that children's home and neighborhood environments carry the potential for harm. In such cases, educators—acting as the primary custodians for children's safety and welfare—may purposefully wall themselves in, rendering parent engagement as something schools and educators should “wall out” in the process (H. Lawson, 2010; Lipman, 1997).

Although the actions and orientations of educators carry import for parent's school engagement, the resources, strengths, and capacities of parents are also influential. As research indicates, the quality and nature of parents' existing resources not only shape their preparedness to navigate the social, cultural, and political boundaries of schooling (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Warren et al., 2009), they also influence the extent to which their time and resources are consumed by daily hassles.

Framed in this way, research suggests that parents who struggle to meet their family's basic needs (e.g., health, housing, employment, and subsistence-related supports) may face several important barriers to their school engagement. For some parents, these constraints may simply involve the loss of time they might otherwise devote to their children's schooling (M. Lawson, 2003). For others, their barriers to engagement may extend beyond time limitations to include psychological difficulties such as (perceived) low levels of parent agency, autonomy, confidence, and competence (Epstein, 2001). For other parents, persistent struggles to secure their instrumental and psychological needs may contribute to a host of social barriers, including parent and family withdrawal from those community-based and neighborhood-serving institutions that are charged with supporting them (Wilson, 1997).

Research suggests that low-income Latino parents who are new to the United States, enter the country undocumented, speak a language other than English, and have low educational backgrounds in their country of origin may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing several, if not all, of the aforementioned barriers and constraints to engagement in school (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Valdés, 1996). Moreover, because Latino immigrants are equipped with social and cultural resources that carry little (immediate) currency in mainstream American institutions, negotiating the processes and

boundaries of schools and other formal settings may be particularly unwieldy for them (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; De Gaetano, 2007; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). For this reason, securing those resources and relationships that might help Latino parents navigate their social worlds may take precedent over school engagement as their most pressing priority.

The Untapped Potential of Community-Based Organizations

The persistent struggles associated with engaging low-income parents' in schools has encouraged some researchers to seek alternative settings that might better support parents' immediate needs and interests (Keith, 1996; Shutz, 2006). Increasingly, research is identifying community-based organizations (CBOs) as such a setting (Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009).

In the educational research literature, CBOs are viewed as attractive settings for parent engagement because they are often less encumbered by the rigid professional practices, policies, and mandates that may consume the daily activities of schools and other formal institutions (Warren, 2005). This organizational flexibility is thought by researchers to enable CBOs to perform unique community roles (Shirley, 1997). Chief among these roles and responsibilities is the design and development of activities, supports, and programs that are tailored to the unique strengths, needs, and challenges of their communities (Keith, 1996; Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2005).

Because the activities of CBOs carry the potential to build more freely upon parents' strengths and interests, parents may be more initially drawn to them (Warren et al., 2009). Once drawn in, parents may derive several benefits. Of these, social capital development may carry particular import, especially for undocumented Latino parents.

Social capital development is often important to undocumented Latino parents because of the social and cultural isolation they often experience entering American neighborhoods (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As a consequence of this isolation, undocumented Latino parents may lack access to the resource capital needed to support the educational, social, and economic well-being of their families (Noguera, 2001; Valdés, 1996). For this reason, CBOs with demonstrated capacity as social capital builders represent critical resources for schools that serve populations of undocumented, low-income, Latino families (Shutz, 2006; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009).

CBOs as Sites for Social Capital Development

Social capital is commonly regarded as a social resource that abides in reciprocal, social relationships and contacts (Ciabattari, 2007; Dika & Singh, 2002; Warren et al., 2009). Although the discussion of social capital

implicates several diverse perspectives in the research literature (Dika & Singh, 2002; Noguera, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001), we delimit those here by defining *social capital* as the quality and quantity of resources that flow through people's social ties and networks (Horvat et al., 2003). What this means operationally is as follows: Parents who gain consistent access to resources, aid, and assistance through their existing social ties can be viewed as having high stocks of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Conversely, parents who do not have access to needed aid and assistance may have considerably less social capital from which to draw (Horvat et al., 2003).

Research suggests CBOs can help low-income parents develop social capital by helping them develop two types of instrumental relationships: (a) bonding relationships and (b) bridging relationships (Putnam, 2000; Taylor-Haynes, 2006; Warren et al., 2009). In this study, *bonding relationships* are defined as mutually supportive interactions and exchanges with other parents in the community. *Bridging relationships* are characterized as the social connections people have to those outside of their primary social communities, especially those who have special access to formal educational, social, health, occupational, and financial resources (Putnam, 2000).

Bonding Relationships

In order for Latino immigrants to develop mutually supportive interactions and exchanges with others, they need to have access to social contacts in their neighborhood. Research indicates that CBOs can help parents enhance such contacts when their outreach and recruitment strategies aim to mobilize individual parents into larger whole or collective (Shirley, 1997; Warren et al., 2009). In this study, we refer to this process as *collective parent engagement* (Alameda-Lawson, Lawson, & Lawson, 2010; Warren et al., 2009).

Research indicates that CBOs can help generate collective parents' engagement by fostering two important conditions. The first involves creating opportunities for parents to better understand how their experiences, worldviews, and circumstances may be connected to others around them (Carreon et al., 2005; Shirley, 1997). The second involves fostering opportunities for parents to act on their shared goals, needs, and interests (Keith, 1996; Shirley, 1997; Warren et al., 2009). Theoretically, when these two conditions are established by CBOs, parents may develop important social ties not only to each other but also to the organizational setting in which those activities are located (Alameda-Lawson & Lawson, 2002; Warren et al., 2009).

Moreover, once established, parents may activate the relationships secured through CBOs to support other areas of their lives (Boyte, 2008). For example, reciprocal exchanges such as childcare, child monitoring, and subsistence support have been found to follow parents' bonding

relationships in collective activities (Alameda-Lawson et al., 2010; Horvat et al., 2003). Furthermore, when present in the aggregate, parents' bonding relationships have been tied to several community-level enhancements, such as improved neighborhood organization and monitoring, increased civic engagement in schools and other community-serving institutions, and other indicators of collective efficacy (e.g., Sampson, 2003; Shirley, 1997).

Bridging Relationships

The extant literature highlights two primary ways CBOs can help low-income Latino parents forge bridging relationships with schools and other formal community institutions. The first is based on the community-organizing work of Saul Alinsky (see Shutz, 2006). Here, CBOs conduct outreach in the community to develop and mobilize a core group of parent leaders or advocates. Once activated, these advocates are trained specifically by CBOs to work with educators and other institutional agents to develop professional practices, policies, and governance structures that are more responsive to the strengths, needs, and interests of low-income children, families, and communities (Shirley, 1997; Shutz, 2006; Warren, 2005).

Another way CBOs can help parents develop bridging relationships is by providing ready access to intermediaries or cultural brokers (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Warren et al., 2009). As research indicates, cultural brokers are agents who provide needed linkages between families, communities, and formal institutions. They do so by providing any one of a range of essential services. For instance, cultural brokers can provide translation services at schools for families who do not speak English (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). They can provide technical help for families who need assistance completing paperwork for schools, health and human service agencies, legal proceedings, or job applications (Alameda, 1996). They can serve as community liaisons to help families better understand the practices and policies of institutions as well as help professionals learn how to better respond to the strengths and needs of families (Warren et al., 2009).

Framing the Study

This study elicits Latino parents' understanding of the practices and conditions that fostered their collective parent engagement. In addition to generating a basic understanding, this study was designed to develop action-oriented knowledge about how school-family-community partnerships might be configured to benefit children, families, schools, and neighborhoods at the same time. The particular effort studied here is a community-based, school-linked design with intermediaries serving as cultural brokers.

The research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1: What family, community, and organizational conditions facilitate the development of school-linked, collective parent engagement?

Research Question 2: How does collective parent engagement enhance the resources and capital of Latino families?

Research Question 3: What are the outcomes and improvement pathways that accompany this particular school-linked, collective parent engagement design?

Method

The Parent Engagement Program

The parent engagement program operates under the moniker *Community Action Network* (CAN).¹ CAN is a 5-year-old partnership initiative. It involves working relationships developed among a local CBO, the division of social work at a local university, and a local school district.

The parent program is housed in the community organization. Its people and activities use three large activity rooms that the program rents from a local church. This church resides directly across the street from a Title I elementary school.

We describe CAN as a parent-guided and parent-run, collective parent engagement program because parents are engaged to design, implement, and operate every activity. The ongoing organization, implementation, and operation of these activities are chiefly facilitated by the project coordinator—a parent and community resident—who was trained as a paraprofessional social worker by both authors as described in the next section.

In addition to the program coordinator, two additional full-time paraprofessional staff are employed to provide school readiness programming to toddlers as well as onsite after-school homework support to youngsters who live in the community. At the behest of CAN parents, the school district provides both day and evening ESL (English as a second language) classes for parents 5 days a week at the program site.

Community organizing and development strategies are used throughout the program. For example, parents' initial engagement in the program is facilitated by door-to-door outreach in the community. During outreach, parents are first recruited to participate in a 40-hour outreach training course developed by the second author from previous work (Alameda, 1996). As part of this training, parents are taught skills related to communication, outreach, interviewing, community assessment, and referral. In order to "graduate" from the training, parents are required to make 25 contacts through door-to-door outreach in their own neighborhood. Following graduation, parents are convened with other program parents to participate in a series of ongoing workshops to develop ideas for providing services and supports to other families in the community and begin to flesh out details for

implementation planning. In order to support parent time, participation, and engagement, parents receive a \$40 weekly stipend.

At the time of this study, CAN parents operated six primary community-based programs for children and families in the community. These programs include a Referral and Information Center; Talents Exchange Programming (cooking, sewing, exercise, hairstyling, and cosmetology classes); Community Outreach; a School Safety program (traffic control on the two streets bordering the school); a Community Dollar Store (parents sell convenience and health items for one dollar per item); and a School-Community Events and Recreation program.

On a typical day, about 8 parents arrive at the program site at 7:00 a.m. Four parents staff the community's crossing guard program; two parents staff the Referral and Information Center (including the Community Dollar Store); and two parents staff the Talents Exchange Program, which usually consists of exercise/Sumba classes. Additional talents programming (staffed by CAN parents) as well as child development and ESL programming (run by CAN program staff and the school district) begin at 10:00 a.m. and run until about 4:00 p.m. each day. All services are funded by grants (\$250,000 annual budget) and are available to the public.

Program Implementation and Data Collection Context

The School Community

Families targeted as participants and/or leaders of the CAN program reside in Camino Del Oro, a mixed-income community in a mid-size city in a Western state. This city is located more than 400 miles from the United States–Mexico border. The Camino Del Oro community within this city has two identifiable pockets of neighborhoods. One houses largely middle-income families and the other is home to culturally diverse, low-income families.

Demographic data accentuate the differences among Camino Del Oro's neighborhoods. For example, the poverty rate for the broader community is 17%. In contrast, 81% of the children residing in the west end neighborhoods of Camino Del Oro (where the intervention was implemented) are economically disadvantaged. While the broader community consists mostly of a White (63%) population, the profile of children in the west end is rich with cultural diversity. Hispanic residents represent the largest ethnic group (38.5%), followed by African Americans (28.6%) and Whites/Caucasians (24.9%).

Six Title I schools (four elementary, one middle, one high school) serve the west end neighborhood. For the past two decades, these schools have struggled to meet the educational needs of their diverse and often transient students. Twin Rivers Elementary School, where 90% of the CAN parents'

children are enrolled, is no exception. Twin Rivers has failed to meet improvement guidelines under No Child Left Behind for 3 of the past 6 years.

Nevertheless, in spite of its reputation for low standardized test scores, students at Twin Rivers Elementary have met federal and state improvement guidelines in 3 of the past 4 years. These increases in test scores have occurred in spite of significant administrative turnover at the school: Three principals have served Twin Rivers in the past 5 years.

School-community collaboration. In spite of principal turnover, the school's leaders have worked with CAN leadership, staff, and parents to develop and operate a collaborative that serves the community and the school. This school-community collaborative meets once a month at the CAN project site. The collaborative consists of officials from the county's human service and redevelopment agencies, school leadership, the school counselor, project parents and staff, and parks department leadership. Over a 2-year period, the collaborative brokered several new or enhanced resources for the school-community. All of the resources brokered by the collaborative were undertaken after CAN parents identified their importance during meetings of the collaborative.

Examples of these resources included the repainting of crosswalks around the school, the implementation of radar trailers for traffic control around the school and its nearby streets, the creation of youth soccer teams in the community, a three-fold increase in ESL classes provided to the community, the provision of immigration law services for community families, and child development trainings for parents and childcare providers in the community.

Researcher Positionality

Both of the authors are coarchitects of the CAN project and remain responsible for developing the theory of action and training protocols of the initiative. We undertook the development and research project described in this article because we believe there are manifest needs for different models, approaches, and strategies for engaging and mobilizing vulnerable parents in and around low-income school communities. Specifically, we designed the initiative to be parent-guided and parent-run because our previous work indicated that the development of mutual support and assistance networks in communities carries strong potential for achieving outcomes along several different social and institutional units of analysis, including schools (Alameda-Lawson et al., 2010). As a consequence, rather than wait for such practice innovations to present themselves for research, we devoted much of our time and attention to developing and then researching a practice innovation from the ground up.

At the time of the study, both of us were about 18 months removed from the day-to-day work of effectively getting the innovation-as-intervention off

of the ground, so we could make the important but difficult move of trying to research it. However, readers should remain mindful that when the initiative started, both of us facilitated the program's outreach training course and program development workshops. This role continued for about 8 months until the paraprofessional social worker—whom we hired and trained—could assume those responsibilities herself. In addition, both of us participated in door-to-door outreach in the community during the project's first 2 years, and we also served as cultural brokers for the project and its families through the time of this writing.

Specifically, our roles as cultural brokers involved working with school, district, and (social service) agency leadership to form a school-community collaborative (described in the next section). Based on parent requests, we also worked with school leadership to help them schedule school activities (e.g., parent teacher conferences and school events) during days and times that were the most accommodating to families. In view of these roles and responsibilities, important questions remain surrounding how much social capital we injected into the program and the lives of its participant-actors.

As we transitioned from our roles as action-facilitators to researchers (and learners), our day-to-day contact with parents and staff became increasingly limited. However, our original positions as designers of the project continued to provide an ease of access to the participants and to the interworking of the program. The fact that we were familiar and known to the participants helped facilitate dialogues with parents that were quite conversational and appeared to involve high levels of trust, or *confianza* (e.g., Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). However, our previous roles and status in relation to the program and its participants involves pre-existing biases and preconceptions that need to be constantly questioned and checked. Accordingly, several measures were taken to promote the trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The first such measure involved randomly selecting parents to participate in in-depth, ethnographic interviews. This random sampling method was used because we think that randomization helps generate a representative cross-section of parental worldviews and experiences and helps us avoid selecting only those participants whose program experiences appeared to follow normative or ideal pathways (Reglin, 1993).

The second measure we used to promote trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability involves the enlisting of a university professor to serve as a primary peer debriefer. This professor, who specialized in case study research methods, served as a critical friend and devil's advocate throughout the study. He provided critical feedback on the development of the study's interview questions, protocol, and data analysis. This peer debriefer consistently probed our findings for alternative explanations and themes, challenging us to pay particular attention to "within group" variations in parents'

experiences, worldviews, and attributions toward the program (e.g., Becker, 1998).

The third measure we employed to address issues of positionality and researcher bias includes “member checking” with the 12 CAN parents who participated in the study. This process of member checking involved parental review of interview transcripts as well as the themes we derived from their interviews. In the two instances in which parents’ experiences diverged from our initial themes and codes, we went back to the data and reorganized our codes to enhance our responsiveness to parents’ emic perspectives (e.g., Rogoff, 1995).

The fourth measure used to enhance the study’s credibility involved coding and categorizing the data independently; the first author coded the interviews as transcribed in English, and the second author, who is Latina, coded the transcripts in Spanish. This process of independent coding and categorization was undertaken in order to increase the reliability of the study’s findings. Ultimately, this process led to mutual agreement on the majority of themes and categories (88.9%), indicating adequate reliability and validity (Merriam, 2003).

The fifth and final measure we used to promote dependability and confirmability of the study’s findings involved enlisting another university professor to serve as an auditor for all decisions made throughout data collection and analysis, including the review of original transcripts, data analysis documents, and the text of our manuscript drafts. In particular, this auditor encouraged us to include an analysis and review of program documents in our final write-up and to balance the institutional and societal constraints that remain intact in spite of parents’ positive perceptions of their engagement with the program.

In sum, we believe that these measures represent the most rigorous and pragmatic means of addressing not only our positionality as action researchers but also the social capital resources we potentially injected into the program. Whereas we recognize that conventional standards of rigor and researcher objectivity are sacrificed in this approach, our predicament is typical of action-oriented innovations involving new designs for both practice and research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007).

Study Design

To examine our research questions, we use an ethnographic, embedded case study design (Yin, 2009). This design is appropriate because the study’s case—the CAN parent engagement program—includes interdependent and nested subunits of children, parents, families, and activity. In this study, two particular subunits of the program are of chief interest: (a) the parent providers (the “CAN parents”) who design and operate the program’s activities and (b) the program recipients who participate in activities designed

and run by the CAN parents, who are parents of school-aged children in the community.

Because the CAN parent engagement program involves social processes and interactions we could not directly observe, we rely on multiple sources of evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Like other studies that examine the particularities of social action and development in context, our research design sacrifices external validity in pursuit of internal validity, trustworthiness, and theory development (Yin, 2009).

Data Sources

This research relies on several data sources, including a parent questionnaire of parent and family demographics, a semistructured interview protocol, focus groups, archival records, documentary evidence of program activities and events, and participant observation. These data sources provide significant opportunities for extensive analysis, enhancing insight into the CAN case study (Merriam, 2003). In addition, in order to freely promote the voices, worldviews, and experiences of the CAN parents, each parent was provided with a disposable digital camera so that they might capture aspects of their social environment that were most important to them (e.g., Morrow, 2001). These photographs were used as a lead-in/warm-up for more formal interviewing.

Sample Selection

CAN Parents/Providers

Using the Research Randomizer program, we randomly selected 12 CAN parents (all mothers) from a list of 100 CAN parents (all mothers) who were trained by the program to develop and provide services to other families in the community. Specifically, this randomizer program was used to generate 20 random numbers needed to identify the initial pool of 12 parents as well as 8 alternates. Each of the initially selected 12 participants agreed to participate. However, during the 2-month period of interviews, 2 participants dropped out of the study: One parent returned to Mexico for a family emergency (e.g., Valdés, 1996) and the other dropped out because of a conflicting work schedule.

After contacting the next 2 alternate parents identified through randomization, 12 Spanish-speaking, Latina immigrant parents agreed to participate in the study. The median age of the group was 28 years (range: 22 to 43). The average length of program participation for the CAN parent provider group was 24.5 months (range: 8 to 52), which is slightly higher than the 20.4-month average rate of participation for mothers engaged in the program. On average, parents in the CAN parent provider group had 2.8 children (range: 1 to 6), lived in the United States for 6.3 years (range: 2 to 12), and lived in the community for 4.5 years (range: 1.5 to 12). All the

parents in this study were married. All reported family incomes at or below the federal poverty line, and none of the parents had completed high school in their home countries.

Program Recipients

The second study group ($n = 20$) was selected from a list of 841 parents who had participated in the program for at least a month in the preceding 2 years. Although these parents participated in the program activities, they were not engaged as providers of CAN services. As such, we refer to this parent group as *program recipients*. To select this group of parents, we used the research randomizer program to generate a list of 50 parents we could target for inclusion in the study. Of the first 25 parents on this list, 20 were located and agreed to participate in the study.

In total, the 20 female parents (all Spanish-speaking Latinas) who constituted the program recipient group had a median age of 32 (range: 22 to 49). The median length of participation in program activities for this group is 12.4 months (range: 6 to 36 months), which is slightly higher than the 10-month average participation of service recipients in the program. On average, these parents had 2.1 children (range: 1 to 5) aged 3 to 12 in their custody. All but one parent reported family income levels at or below the federal poverty line.

Procedure

Following institutional review board approval, the study progressed through two phases. In the first phase, 12 randomly selected CAN parents were invited to attend individual meetings. At these meetings, we explained the study and secured informed consent. Once registered, each informant was provided with a digital camera and was asked to take pictures of something that (a) made them feel good, (b) represented what they wanted for themselves and their family, (c) represented their neighborhood, and (d) represented their community. Each CAN parent was then allowed a 1-week period to take the photographs before returning them to be uploaded to our computers for the interview. Parents kept the cameras as an incentive and reward for their participation in the study.

Semistructured interviews of the CAN parents were scheduled within 2 weeks of the initial meeting. These 1- to 2-hour interviews consisted of completing a form with basic demographic data, a discussion of the photographs taken in the community, and the completion of an 18-question interview protocol.

In the second phase of the study, we conducted two focus groups of 10 program recipients each. Each program recipient was contacted either by telephone or a home visit if the parent did not have a telephone ($n = 2$). Each focus group was conducted the day after the phone call so families

could better remember the appointment. All of the parents who initially agreed to participate in the focus groups attended as scheduled.

Both focus group interviews lasted about 2 hours. Each began with participants' completing a form with basic demographic data. Next, members of each focus group sat in a circle and answered questions structured by a 9-question interview protocol.

Although this approach was successful in generating usable data (the themes and categories derived from program recipients matched the CAN parent provider data), our focus group interviews did not yield many usable quotes of these parents' engagement experiences. As a result, our findings present quotes and narratives taken principally from the CAN parent (parent provider) interviews.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using coding procedures commonly associated with the grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987). Verbatim accounts of the audio interview were initially transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English. Both authors read and analyzed each transcription for initial open codes. The first author coded the transcriptions as translated into English and the second author coded the transcriptions in their original Spanish form. Once the initial codes were defined, we found it pragmatic to group together all codes and patterns that dealt with a wider theme. At this stage of axial coding, we used field notes and program documents both to help triangulate parents' responses as well as provide counter-hypotheses to emerging themes and patterns (e.g., Becker, 1998; Merriam, 2003; Prior, 2004).

Findings

Parent's Prior Histories, Knowledge, and Experience

Parent participation in the CAN parent engagement program officially begins when parents participate in group dialogues with other parents at the program site. These dialogues are structured to elicit parents' perceptions of the challenges and barriers that constrain the healthy development and well-being of children, youth, and families in the community. Following each dialogue session, program staff schedule and then organize several group workshops designed to help parents develop and then operate programmatic solutions to the barriers and challenges they identify. Parents' prior histories, knowledge, and experience are therefore explicitly elicited, targeted, and incorporated into this particular school-linked, collective, parent engagement design.

Because all of the CAN parents in this study are (undocumented) Spanish-speaking immigrants, their dispositions toward collective

engagement are highly influenced by their prior knowledge and experience of the hardships associated with immigration into the United States. As the following narratives indicate, the barriers, difficulty, and trauma they experienced entering the United States were much greater than they ever imagined.

Border Crossings

All the women who participated in the study came to Camino Del Oro to follow their husband's search for higher paying work. While supporting their husbands remains important to them, it was not the only reason they left their countries of origin. For these women, securing upward mobility and advancement for both themselves and their children represented key magnets for their immigration to the United States. As one CAN parent, Juana noted,

My dream has always been to make a life here because in my town there isn't any possibility of anything. So, I want a different life for myself, my family, my kids. . . . If I have the opportunity to establish ourselves in this country, then perfect. Because I always said that this is the country of dreams and of reaching high places. And I hope to God that everything works out and that we are able to stay and stabilize in this country.

However, for most of the women in the study, dreams of prosperity in the United States were quickly dampened by their experiences crossing the border. Because all of the women in the study immigrated (illegally) to join husbands who were already established in the United States, they were led in their journeys across the border by hired guides known in colloquial terms as "coyotes." For most of these women, their experiences with their coyote guides were terrifying and inflicted significant social-psychological harm on both themselves and their children. In the following passage, Gloria rocked back and forth as she provided a quote indicative of parents' experiences crossing the border:

We were always hungry. Sometimes the coyotes would make eggs . . . with tap water . . . but then they wouldn't give us any. They wouldn't feed us. And then, some would abuse the women without husbands. And I had a month trying to cross. So, imagine with those kids, one month trying to pass them. Immigration had already caught us like four times, so it was really difficult. So, then when the *mocos* [helicopters] would come by, we'd get underneath a tree. And all of us lay on the ground trying to cover ourselves with the things that were there. And the baby got hysterical, because she knew that immigration was going to get us again. And everyone was trying to shut her up, but she was hysterical. She was already traumatized.

On the heels of the trauma experienced by themselves and their children, parents described their initial experiences in the community of Camino Del Oro as a blur of distress and confusion. In contrast to other studies that have documented the tendency of families to immigrate to locales surrounded by family and kinship networks (e.g., Valdés, 1996), the parents engaged in the CAN program report entering the community without pre-existing social ties. Lacking ties to others in the community, parents report profound feelings of social and cultural isolation prior to their engagement in the program. Inez said,

Whether you have documents or not, you don't feel that liberty, that tranquility. Here you live stressed out because you're locked up, because you don't have family to visit, because you don't have a friend or a strong friendship to tell you, "[If] you're having problems, I [can] give you my hand, right?" You don't have it. I mean, you look around you and you're alone.

Parents' initial experiences of isolation were both fueled and compounded by their ongoing fears of deportation—a fear that dominates nearly every aspect of their lives. In fact, parents reported that routine acts of living, such as taking their kids to medical appointments or folding clothes in the laundry rooms of their apartment building, involved significant suspicion (and fear) of those around them. For this reason, the vast majority of parents interviewed for this study report that they essentially “locked themselves up” in their small, one-bedroom apartments (which were often shared with other families) for months after their arrival in the community. Belen said,

I know families who told me they had no friends, they did not know anyone, or simply it was difficult for them getting beyond the barriers that I mentioned at the beginning when I got here. This fear, because it feels different . . . I mean, there are people who speak the same language, but how do I know I can trust that person or not? It's a great fear when you don't know or can't trust other's intentions.

Parents' consistent lack of access to supportive people and places resulted in a cumulative cycle of stress. Parents reported that this stress started first with their own feelings of being “trapped” in their homes and then deepened as they viewed their own psychological states as harmful to their children. In the following quote, Esmeralda articulated how parents' social-cultural isolation has deleterious effects on the well-being of parents and children alike.

Cooking something delicious wasn't worth it because your mind isn't clear. I was alone, stressed. I didn't even have the will to read my kids a book or even to listen to them. Sometimes, they would talk and my head would go crazy. It would feel like it would explode.

Parents' initial perceptions of stress and isolation led them to view themselves as prisoners inside and fugitives outside their homes. Fear was ever-present, and it followed them when they walked outside, scheduled and attended medical appointments, and talked with their neighbors. Although parents described these fears as initially crippling, these fears did not eliminate their capacity for individual agency and resourcefulness. Instead, parents' experiences of social and cultural isolation appeared to help them imagine how their closed surroundings could be transformed into the types of settings they imagined before entering the United States.

Eliciting Parents' Initial Participation and Engagement

Each of the CAN parents reported that they learned about the CAN program as a result of the door-to-door outreach efforts—an effort that staff led every weekday, nearly all day, for about 15 months. This intensive outreach strategy was undertaken because there was no parent involvement at Twin Rivers Elementary School (including no parent participation in the Parent-Teacher Association [PTA]) from which to draw when the program was first implemented.

As a part of this outreach strategy, CAN staff and leadership (and later parents) went door to door, introducing themselves to parents while providing them (in Spanish) two types of information about services and opportunities in the community. The first type of information included detailed schedules and descriptions of the activities and services provided by the CAN program at the CAN program site. The second type of information included flyers with detailed contact information about various essential services in the community (such as financial assistance programs, medical services, school calendars, etc.). These flyers highlighted agencies and services that employed Spanish-speaking staff as well as other special resources, such as transportation services for families. All of the parents interviewed in the study reported that the provision of these resources (through door-to-door outreach and person-to-person contact) helped to initially lure them to the program site for additional resources, information, and support.

Once the program helped families secure additional informational resources and capital, parents reported that their continued participation and engagement were facilitated by other important resources included in the program's design. Chief among these resources was the parent stipend. Because many of the CAN parents cannot work legally in the United States, parents viewed the provision of a stipend as a key means to help alleviate the economic constraints faced by their families. Inez noted,

Cristina [the program coordinator] told me about the training and everything related, and then when I came into the training I found out about the check. Because I would just hear talk. But when we had the training, I found out about the check, that the check existed.

You had [to assume] certain responsibilities, but they gave you \$40 a week. And, at the end of the month, they gave you a \$160 check! It is very good because it serves food for a week and it makes me happy that I can provide that to my family.

In addition to financial constraints, childcare represented another key barrier to parents' engagement in the program. In view of this potential constraint, the program was designed to provide educational and school-readiness activities for young children at the same time parents engaged in parent-focused activity. This design feature was viewed by parents as instrumental to their engagement; CAN parents reported that they did not feel comfortable addressing their own needs for support and/or development until their children's and/or family's needs were addressed first.

Ultimately, our data suggest that the combined provision of informational, economic, educational, and child-centered resources represented key facilitators and conditions for parents' initial engagement in collective activity. As Juana noted,

For me, part of the support is that the program helps us in the economic and, umm, they help us also in work because we can come here and bring our kids to have fun also. And I want to say that this is very good because in no job do they permit you to take your kids to work. So then, those are the advantages that we have—it is a center for us, but most importantly, the kids get to start their education.

Once parents perceived that their children's and family's educational, developmental, and basic needs are supported, they reported an enhanced readiness to pursue their own needs for support, development, and well-being. For these parents, the program's initial social benefits were facilitated by the interactions parents engendered with others during collective engagement activity.

Developing a Parent Collective

As described previously, the development of CAN's parent-to-parent support strategy is initially facilitated by ongoing group dialogue sessions among parents, a process where parents participate in group conversations about the barriers and challenges they experience as well as how they might create programmatic solutions to those challenges and constraints. Parents reported they derived several social-psychological benefits from these initial planning and dialogue-focused workshops. Chief among these benefits are self-reported enhancements in social-cultural belonging and relatedness. As Consuelo explained,

I can come here to CAN and we can talk about, about things that interest us as well as me. And I feel comfortable being with them,

and I feel, like, maybe, if I have a problem and we talk about it . . . maybe one of them already passed through the same problem, and she talks and I pay attention to what she's talking about. And I say, "Oh, well it also happened to her." And I feel like a little more tranquil. . . . And then how we go to the meetings for outreach on Mondays, and we talk about what we're going to do, and sometimes we talk about other things. . . . And one feels like you're relieved from the stress you have. That one hears one another, that one hears people and that they hear one too.

CAN parents reported that consistent opportunities for interaction at the program site led to gradual increases in group cohesion and trust—a process they referred to as “*confianza*.” For these women, their emergent senses of *confianza* appeared reflective of two important process outcomes. The first of these outcomes involves the initial development of bonding social capital among members of the parent group. The second involves decreases in parental feelings of social-psychological isolation. Juana noted,

Well I think that [since] we've had a lot of time working together, we interact more, we have better communication. Well that's how we have more confidence: talking, knowing each other, and with that you get even more confidence to talk about life even, because sometimes it's difficult to have that trust, even though we all want and need to have it. And now we do.

Parents reported that their increased trust and confidence in other parents was facilitated by the opportunities they had to contribute to the development of group activities. Parents reported that by contributing to the design of group activities, they became more confident in their own capacity as individuals. Furthermore, as individuals within the group became more confident and efficacious, parents became more able to contribute to and accomplish their collective goals. These interactive and transactional processes became evident in parents' descriptions of how their individual strengths and assets were identified and then employed to create parent engagement activity. As Thelma described,

Because we know that all of us have many talents but maybe we haven't discovered or used them yet, including me. Like, I did not know that I had the talent of giving a class. I didn't think so, but now I do. So one day Cristina tells me, she says, "Hey Doña Thelma, do you make necklaces?" I tell her, "For my daughters, yes." "And do you sew?" "Yes," also. "And do you cook?" "That too, Cristina." "And do you do this, and do you do that?" And I say, "Yes, I do all that." "And why hadn't you told us?" she asks. "Well, because I did not think it was talent. Like, I thought that everyone did it." And now we all provide those classes to other parents in the community. And they come!

As parents jointly discover and employ their strengths and assets through collective activity, they appear to translate their perceptions of confidence, trust, and efficacy into individual and collective senses of competence. For these women, the competence they experienced through the program appears to have gradually extended to other areas of their lives. One way parents' senses of competence initially manifested itself is through their efforts to assert their autonomy with their husbands.

For instance, during interviews parents proudly described incidents in which they spent their stipend money without permission from their husbands. Parents also described how they used their apparent newfound skills to garner other informal economic opportunities in the community, including cutting hair, housecleaning, and selling homemade food products. Moreover, in several cases, the revenue generated from formal and informal activities in the community allowed parents to purchase a used car, facilitating additional, independent access to other needed social, economic, and community resources.

Expanding Social Networks Outside of the Parent Group

As parents developed a better understanding of how their strengths, needs, and circumstances relate to those around them, they began to imagine ways they could collectively become more resourceful. One way parents' resourcefulness was manifest is through the exchange of goods and services with others. For the CAN parents in this study, such acts of reciprocal exchange emerged first with other parents in the CAN parent group. Juana said,

The truth yeah, with my partners, I commented before that I didn't have communication with anyone in the community, and now I know many women and it does help a lot because sometimes one needs a favor, any help, and I feel more sure. And I think that knowing other parents in the program gives you more confidence. And when one needs something, like a loan, or someone to watch your kids, then you have it. And then you give it back.

Parental acts of reciprocal exchange began with other parents in the CAN program, but they later extended to other families in the community. Apparently, these exchange processes followed parent's awareness of their interdependence with others in the community. In the following quote, Thelma captured the evolution of parents' thinking about how their own well-being and development is linked to those around them. In particular, notice how her word choice moves from descriptions of individual accomplishment to collective and community-focused language:²

CAN has helped me as a woman. And since I have come, I have learned many new things. But it is also so important to learn many

things from each other, so that we can have a better future. When we have an event, we all get together to utilize our social capital. We help each other pull the community forward.

Such shifts in language and orientation appear to reflect a key tipping point in parents' individual and collective engagement, the timing of which is not altogether clear. What is apparent, however, is that once parents began to situate the well-being of themselves and their families within the context of the broader community, they made a shift from essentially being (active) recipients of the program's service/design structure to transformative, bridging agents in the community.

Parent Engagement as Bridging Social Capital

Parents' strategies for engaging other families in the community tended to follow the progression of their own prior knowledge and experience. Because CAN parents viewed child-focused activities as an initial facilitator for their own engagement, their initial strategies for engaging other community families tended to center on helping them meet the educational needs of their children. As Amanda said,

We explain to parents how it would help them if they bring their kids to those classes so they can get used to hearing English and working in the classroom. And another thing that we can tell the mothers that their kids need to learn to separate from them a little to be ready for school. And we have heard kids tell their moms, "Let's go to the CAN program class." And that makes us feel good to see the kids being independent too.

Parents reported that child participation in site-based activities enabled them to recruit families to participate in other program activities, including events designed to support the well-being of parents and their entire families. In view of their own prior feelings of depression and social isolation, CAN parents also designed programs to include family-focused activities they hope will mitigate the social, psychological, political, and economic constraints faced by other families in the community. As Juana explained,

It was nice to see how the families would come and would have fun, they ate something that the group always prepared for them; their kids happy. So then you would be able to notice that it helped them to relax. Well, I think that that is very important that the family has a calm place to go and relax. Like, get distracted for free and at a low cost. Because life is very costly. For me it is very difficult, I have four kids and taking them to private places costs a lot of money and being cooped up in the house all weekend is horrible for the kids, and they start crying, fighting amongst each other. . . . So that's when the mom gets stressed! That's why we have to have low cost or

free activities for the community *in the community*. That's how we're going to make families happy. [emphasis added]

As other families in the community became more engaged in the program, parents' engagement appeared to extend to informal activities in the neighborhood. For the parents in this study, the expansion of the program into broader community spaces represented an important step toward improving the community's social environment. In a focus group conversation, a service recipient described how her involvement at the program site facilitated reciprocal exchange with others in the community:

Coming to the programs here have helped us to know people in the community. Because before, well one lives in their house, doesn't know who lives beside one. But coming here one meets many people from the same community, and one starts to like help one another back in the community. So, if one needs something, one knows who can watch their kids, or where the good schools are. That's what we get from coming.

A primary means through which the CAN parents expanded social networks into the community was through door-to-door outreach. In contrast to early program outreach efforts that centered on providing information about activities at the program site, parent-driven outreach efforts were more explicitly directed toward breaking down social isolation and withdrawal in the community. As Amanda explained,

What I do is outreach and I would describe it like this: I go out to the community and I invite people to come and participate in the activities that we offer here and in the community. And I help them come to meet their neighbors. And then they lose the fear and the mistrust that exists in the community—the fear that I had when I first came.

When parents conducted outreach in the community, they became increasingly familiar to residents who live in their own neighborhoods. Furthermore, as parents became more comfortable and familiar with the social environment around them, they became more efficacious at recruiting parents into their activities. Neighborhood organization is an important offshoot of this interplay between community engagement and enhanced community interaction and trust. Gloria said,

But here in this area I remember that they said it was a really bad area before, and I feel like it's getting better because everyone already knows everyone. . . . For example, I live in this corner and someone that I know lives over there, so if I see that something is happening over there and one helps each other out, or you call the police. I don't know, you look out for their interest in some way and the same person knows your house. . . . And maybe that's why I like it here, because I already know people.

As parents viewed their community as more organized and engaged, they perceived that other residents viewed Camino Del Oro as a better place in which to live. Among the community-level benefits CAN parents experienced or witnessed are increased interactions among neighbors, increased interactions among people in different cultural and ethnic groups, and increased levels of informal social control and parental monitoring. In the following quote, Thelma described these benefits as they manifested themselves through the traffic guard program the parents run for children before and after school:

Because I tell you that the school crossing program, well it doesn't have a price. . . . It does not have a price because we have a group of little Black kids who at first did not want to cross with us. But now they start talking. What do they talk to me about? I don't know what they talk to me about, because I only understand one percent. But now they talk to me. And that has helped me a lot because, even here, people are changing, right? And we are meeting people. But like here, it's an area that we don't want to leave. Like . . . I know a lady who left and she didn't take her daughter out of school. She kept her address. . . . So then she comes here to the program [while her daughter's in school].

In summary, CAN parents arrived in the community of Camino Del Oro with aspirations for upward advancement in the United States. However, once they arrived, their fear of deportation combined with the traumas they experienced crossing the border often made social interaction and integration difficult. As a result, parents initially perceived their surrounding social environments as a confusing arrangement of closed, private spaces that were harmful to their children as well as themselves.

Parents designed and developed programs in relation to their experiences of social isolation and withdrawal, including the ways in which their own feelings limited the development and well-being of themselves and their children. Accordingly, parents designed their activities to target multiple units of analysis, including children's educational and social development, parent and family well-being, and informal neighborhood organization. Interactions between parents' own personal development and the development of the CAN parent group appears to be an important mechanism for how these activities and attendant benefits may have come about.

Discussion

This study describes the important facilitators for and benefits deriving from an innovative parent engagement program for low-income Latino parents. Findings from parents' narratives suggest the CAN parent engagement program serves as a proxy for multiple and complex social processes. Consistent with emergent theory, these social processes can be best

understood as a set of complex interactions and transactions that occur when individual parents, parent collectives, and surrounding social environments develop in tandem (Kelly, 2006; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

Our data indicate that both CAN parents and the recipients of their programs identify several significant barriers and constraints to the health, well-being, and development of their children and families. Chief among these barriers and constraints are parental fears, which contribute to their social isolation and sense of powerlessness. These fears include distrust of neighbors, public sector helping institutions, and their professionalized agents. Parents live in a state of constant worry that they, their spouses, or their children will be arrested or deported at a moment's notice.

Parents structured their programs and services in relation to these significant constraints and barriers. They paid particular attention to how they might lessen the burden of these barriers on children and their families in the community.

For instance, parents run an information and referral program that helps bridge connections between families and social, health, and educational service systems. They develop and operate talent exchange programs, community events, and parent exercise programs to help parents relax, interact, and de-stress from the daily routines and pressures associated with poverty and social exclusion. They also conduct door-to-door outreach in the community to lessen the tendency of community parents to isolate themselves and their children from the world around them.

In addition to revealing parents' theories of action and corresponding worldviews, this study also provides important clues regarding how individual and community change and development may occur within programs like CAN. These processes implicate important, positive outcomes. Three outcomes are especially salient: improvements in parents' psychological senses of community (Cantillon, 2006; McMillan & Chavis, 1986), social capital, and collective efficacy (Sampson, 2003).

Parent Engagement as an Intermediary Social Setting

In a seminal work in community psychology, McMillan and Chavis (1986) elaborated on Sarason's (1974) original conception of a Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC). They suggested that an individual's psychological sense of community is comprised of individual perceptions of influence (the extent to which members believe that their actions influence the actions of others), integration (the extent to which members feel rewarded for their participation), shared emotional connection (based on shared history and participation), and dynamics and transactions between these elements.

Findings from this study strongly indicate that the CAN program's structure helps to facilitate the development of parents' PSOC. For instance, the program's design to incorporate parents' ideas, talents, opinions, and

feedback into the daily operation and development of the program appears to represent an important gateway for parents to develop shared emotional connections with others. In addition, the program's parent-to-parent helping structure appears to implicate several indicators of PSOC, including parents' perceptions of influence, integration, and transactions between these elements.

What is additionally interesting about these findings is the way that parents' PSOC appears to fuel a progression of other social and psychological competencies. For instance, our data indicate that parents' PSOC is dually shaped and driven by increased senses of parent autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Parents then appear to leverage these psychological resources and competencies to develop important social bonds and attachments with others in the program and community.

Earlier in the article, we defined *social capital* as the quality and quantity of resources that flow through people's social ties and networks. Implicit in this definition is the idea that parents' social ties represent a necessary, but by themselves insufficient, condition for social capital (e.g., Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). It appears significant then that CAN parents tend to activate their bonding relationships with others in ways that increase the quality and quantity of resources available to them, their children, and their families.

Thus, our findings implicate an important theoretical progression between school-linked collective parent engagement, parents' psychological sense of community, the development of parents' individual and collective senses of competence and relatedness, and (later) parents' social capital development. In this study, parents' social capital resources appear to be manifest in their reciprocal exchanges with other parents, increased access to formal and informal economic supports, and increased use of formal community services. For children, their social capital resources include increased access to other caring adults in the community, enhanced parent responsiveness to their needs, and enhanced use of preschool and after-school programs.³

Bonding, Brokering, and Bridging

Findings from this study highlight important ways parents might serve as bonding and bridging agents (e.g., cultural brokers) in their communities. For example, in our data, CAN parents leverage the relationships they establish with parents in the CAN parent group to forge horizontal bonding relationships and attachments with and among other families in the community (Putnam, 2000). Over time, these parent-led processes appear to develop in ways that mimic Sampson's (2003) theory of collective efficacy. In fact, similar to Sampson's work and theorizing, CAN parents report community-level practices such as parental monitoring, reciprocal exchange, and intergenerational closure as important indicators of the program's development (see also Horvat et al., 2003).

In addition to establishing horizontal social ties, our findings suggest that parents enhance vertical connections between families and formal institutions in the community. Parents establish these vertical connections by providing other community parents with direct referral to health and human services. They also provide important indirect bridging support by helping parents gain access to the technical help (e.g., completing enrollment paperwork for children's schooling and healthcare, scheduling translation assistance) they may need to successfully navigate formal institutional processes.

In addition to facilitating linkages between families and community service agencies, our program data indicate that parents' vertical social ties extend to schools in important ways. For instance, within 3 years of project implementation, CAN parents comprised the entire parent contingent of the school's PTA.⁴ Furthermore, when parent-teacher conferences were held at the school, parents secured translation assistance from project staff to enhance parent's understanding of and interactions with teachers.⁵ Finally, the assessment work conducted by parents during community outreach enabled the school-community collaborative to better use their social capital resources to develop additional opportunities for student and family engagement, including the development of a youth soccer team, tutoring and mentoring programs for children and youth, and family-focused supports and services at the program site.

Developing Setting-Level Interventions

Sarason (1972) is generally regarded as the first social scientist to advocate for the study (and development) of social settings. Guided by his own extensive experience leading research and development initiatives, Sarason learned that the interventions and programs he developed depended fundamentally on the design of special conditions, including places. He coined the construct of "settings" accordingly, hoping to draw attention to efforts designated toward fostering the conditions needed for learning, development, and change.

In the work presented here, we began with the assumption that manifest needs exist for different models, approaches, and strategies for engaging and mobilizing vulnerable parents in and around low-income school communities. As part of our design work, we proceeded with the theory that Latino parents' collective and sustained engagement may depend on the creation of special settings and conditions—ones that were particularly sensitive to parents' prior histories, knowledge, and/or experience, especially in view of the difficulties posed by undocumented immigration status (e.g., Lopez et al., 2001; Valdés, 1996). For this reason, we situated the collective engagement program in a setting where parents could learn to merge their own funds of knowledge with the formal institutional processes and scripts of

schools, social service agencies, and other helping institutions at their own pace and time.

Findings from this study suggest that CBOs, acting as intermediary social settings, represent important if not necessary conditions from which similar parent engagement efforts may initially take hold. As parents' narratives indicate, the creation and development of intermediary settings appear particularly important for low-income, Latino parents who are struggling with fear and suspicion of institutions and their agents as well as social, political, and economic marginalization. As Warren et al. (2009) have suggested, engagement in CBOs and settings may be necessary before parents view themselves as sufficiently powerful to engage with and influence school agents, practices, and priorities.

Our findings also indicate that, when given appropriate time to develop, school-linked, collective parent engagement programs may begin to serve or act as intermediary social settings in their own right. In other words, when adequately fostered and developed, school-linked, collective parent engagement programs can help extend parent and child engagement from home and community settings to several different helping systems and/or sectors. In our data, the CAN collective engagement program appears to serve as a setting that enhances parents' engagement in CBOs, health and human service agencies, and schools. It also appears linked to enhancements in children's formal engagement in structured activities (e.g., preschool programs, after-school programs, and family-focused community events) in their school community.

Implications for School-Family-Community Linkages

The initial portraits of stress, depression, anxiety, and withdrawal illustrated by the narratives of CAN families (and shared by recipients of their services) provide important reminders for how family and community-level constraints can limit children's optimal learning and development. Whereas CAN parents' resilience and resourcefulness provide optimism that parents could overcome these barriers by themselves, it also seems appropriate to question, absent intervention, how long or at what cost would it take them to do so?

In response to this question, research in the learning sciences clearly demonstrates that exposure to severe levels of isolation and distress impairs the social, cognitive, and emotional development of young people (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Moreover, when differences in language and culture are entered into the equation of stress and hardship, suboptimal educational outcomes and development trajectories can be considered normative—especially for first generation, immigrant children (Berliner, 2006; Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Rothstein, 2004; Taylor-Haynes, 2006).

Although the untoward effects of these non-school-related barriers to learning are well known (e.g., Berliner, 2006; Warren, 2005), questions of policy and practice remain regarding the role and/or capacity of schools to address them. For instance, there remains considerable disagreement both in practice and policy circles regarding whether the reduction of non-school-related barriers to learning should be prioritized in school improvement planning (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Berliner, 2006). Moreover, given the often stringent demands placed on educators' resources and time, questions also remain regarding how schools might effectively partner with other institutional agents even when they identify non-school barriers to learning and healthy development as important targets for school improvement (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002).

In view of these questions, our findings suggest that educators—as well as educational/social researchers—can help address non-school-related barriers to learning, especially when they leverage human and social capital resources in support of families and other community-serving organizations and institutions. In the school-linked, collective parent engagement design described here, school leadership employed their resource capital in several important ways. For example, school leadership used contacts in the district office to help out-station ESL classes at the program site on days and times that were the most conducive to parents' schedules. They made school facilities open for parent and family recreation events on nights and weekends. They supported the parents' crossing guard program by purchasing equipment, and they painted and reconfigured school crosswalks to better accommodate parents' efforts. Finally, school leadership worked with other organizations through the school-community collaborative to generate grant funds to support additional services and supports to children and parents in the community.

Beyond the direct support provided by schools, findings from this study also provide important clues regarding the institutional and organizational configurations that might better support children's family and community environments. Here, our data indicate that school-family-community partnerships might enhance their work by targeting parents not only as service recipients but also as action systems for family and community development and improvement (Keith, 1996). In this sense, organizational innovations that engage parents as communities of practice, gain their commitments, capitalize on their expertise, and build on their strengths and aspirations may carry the potential to generate important resource pathways for parents as well as the schools that serve them.

For instance, where schools are concerned, school-linked, collective parent engagement might later foster the school engagement of parents in school-based activity (such as the PTA). Moreover, the social capital (e.g., resource linkages) parents gain through school-linked, parent engagement might enhance child wellness in ways that reduce school absences.⁶ The

resource capacities of other community parents might provide beacons for parents to stay in the same school community when they choose or are forced to move.

Of course, our data only provide clues for how these resource pathways might benefit schools and other formal, community-serving institutions.⁷ However, as theory indicates, enhancements in parents' social capital resources carry the potential to lessen family and community related challenges and, by extension, make the daily tasks of educators and other helping professionals more manageable (Warren et al., 2009).

Program Limitations

Although we assert the potential of school-linked, collective parent engagement in this article, the limitations of the parent engagement program examined in this study are significant. For instance, although parents within the initiative reported transformational processes, the development of the parent collective was not a seamless or linear task: the group initially "stormed" (mainly around issues of *chisme*, or gossip) as much as they "normed" or "performed." Furthermore, although CAN parents largely accentuated their accomplishments and/or autonomy (*vis á vis* their husbands) in their narratives, domestic violence represented a real and, at times, ongoing threat for many of the women in the program. In fact, it took a great deal of effort and time (up to 4 months) for program staff and leadership to convince some of the fathers in the program to allow their wives to participate in the program.

In addition to the above constraints, it is important to emphasize that key, harmful aspects of social structure remain unchanged in spite of efforts (by parents and the school-community collaborative) to influence it. For instance, the politics surrounding immigration have worsened since parents became engaged in the program: Parents now complain that checkpoints have been created on the northeast side of the neighborhood to identify undocumented families. Moreover, while the project has improved economic opportunity for parents and families within the initiative, it has not changed the reality that parents in the program are not able to work legally, nor does the program's \$250,000 annual budget include sufficient fiscal resources to meaningfully help families in the case of medical emergencies or job loss, which occurs with increased frequency. Therefore, although school-linked parent engagement designs may help develop important, educationally relevant resources and settings, they may be quite insufficient in achieving holistic results.

Conclusion

School-linked, collective parent engagement designs as conceived and implemented in programs like CAN hold promise for family, school, and community improvement. Parents in this study reported that their

engagement in the CAN program may reduce several barriers and resource constraints (e.g., parent and child isolation, family stress, and cultural and linguistic differences) that may otherwise limit their family's preparedness to engage in schools and other formal settings. In addition, parents' engagement appears to foster the development of several parent competencies and resources (e.g., psychological sense of community, social capital, and collective efficacy) schools may leverage to enhance the school experiences and outcomes of low-income children of color.

However, findings from this study also indicate that, despite some important developments, formal institutional processes and its accompanied social structure may remain unaltered by the effort. Consequently, school-linked, collective parental engagement programs should be considered by program leaders and policymakers as but one component of a broader strategy to develop communities and schools both from the outside in as well as the inside out. To the extent educational and social policies are designed to support broad-based leadership for such an agenda, improved family, school, and neighborhood outcomes may be more within our reach.

Notes

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¹All names in the study are pseudonyms.

²The CAN parents received a grant in 2006 from a local government funding source to improve social capital in their neighborhood. As part of writing that grant, parents were introduced to the basic tenets of social capital theory. Parents in the CAN program have since routinely used the term to describe their efforts to expand social interactions and networks in the community.

³Program data indicate that the community's use of preschool and after-school programs increased two-fold following the 2nd year of the CAN program intervention.

⁴The school had no parents involved in the Parent-Teacher Association prior to the implementation of the CAN program.

⁵Project staff provided translation services to about 50 parents per trimester during the week of parent teacher conferences.

⁶Future research can and should better attend to these linkages by including interviews of educators, children, and other helping professionals in their research designs.

⁷Program records show the referral and information center run by CAN parents was successful in improving parent access to health services in the community. All children in the CAN program had updated immunization records at the time of the study. In addition, the program helped 289 of the 841 CAN service recipients secure access to pediatricians (e.g., Medical Home) located near parents' neighborhood community. We did not, however, collect attendance data on these families. Nevertheless, as noted in the Method section, the school enjoyed a 94% attendance rate, which was highest in the feeder pattern.

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