

When Parents Behave Badly: A Critical Policy Analysis of Parent Involvement in Schools

Erica Fernández and Gerardo R. López

Abstract The discourse surrounding parental involvement has long been a topic of discussion among educational scholars. However, over the last three decades, legislators, policymakers, and political bodies have begun to take interest in the parental involvement arena. Utilizing a Critical Policy Analysis, this chapter focuses on the power dynamics of parental involvement in schools, and how the role, function, and meaning of involvement are not only prescribed for parents, but well-delimited within school spaces occupied by marginalized parents. In order to capture the power dynamics of parental involvement in schools, we provide a case study of parental involvement—based on our current and previous research—which details the various ways in which parents are positioned in Latin@ impacted schools, while also showcasing how they are treated by school personnel when parents transgress their expected roles. We then interrogate how and why involvement has become a taken-for-granted idea within education’s discourse (Weaver-Hightower 2008).

Keywords Parental engagement • Critical policy analysis • Parent organizing • Latin@ parental engagement • Parent positionality • Immigration legislation

The discourse surrounding parental involvement has been a topic of discussion among educational scholars for quite some time. Over the past three decades, however, interest in parental involvement matters has intensified among legislators, policymakers, and political bodies that have collectively taken an interest in the subject. But, what exactly is parental involvement? Who gets to define it? Which forms of involvement are privileged in both policy and practice? Questions such as these highlight how power and authority emerge when trying to determine and define parental involvement. But why is parental involvement such a key

E. Fernández (✉)

Department of Educational Leadership, Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut,
249 Glenbrook Road, Unit 3093, Storrs, CT 06269, USA
e-mail: erica.fernandez@uconn.edu

G.R. López

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, College of Education, The University of Utah,
1721 Campus Center Drive RM 2220, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA

© Springer International Publishing Switzerland 2017

M.D. Young, S. Diem (eds.), *Critical Approaches to Education Policy Analysis*,
Education, Equity, Economy 4, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-39643-9_6

111

issue within education's discourse—particularly in the present day? Has parental involvement always been an issue of political importance? Did we always think about parental involvement the way we do now? These questions frame this chapter and lead us to examine critical questions surrounding the troubling dimensions of parental involvement. Our aim is to partially answer these larger questions by centering a narrative of Latin@ parent organizing in an urban school in the Midwest.

Throughout this chapter we will be using elements of Critical Policy Analysis (CPA): an analytic and methodological tool that helps us make sense of the world around us, while interrogating the problematic nature of oppressive systems and structures that reproduce inequalities in society (Atwood and López 2014; Brewer 2014; Marshall 1999; Prunty 1985). CPA focuses on the politics of the everyday and what is normally take for granted with/in the world—including the very structures that organize our daily lives (e.g., legal, educational, political, societal, etc.). Its aim is to highlight the multiple ways in which these structures reproduce and reify inequities in society (Marshall 1985; Prunty 1985). In this regard, CPA does pay attention to the formal/governmental “policies” that emerge from the policy arena, but it also pays close attention to the informal, invisible and “discursive” policies that profoundly shape how we experience and come to know the world around us (Atwood and López 2014; Weaver-Hightower 2008). It posits that social inequalities are not naturally occurring phenomena, but are an intentional by-product of the structures and discourses that shape our world.

In effect, CPA suggests that we are constantly immersed in a world of “policy.” For all intents and purposes, policy is “reality” as we have come to know it (Ball 1994). By interrogating what we take for granted on an everyday basis, CPA aims to expose those very systems and structures that shape and structure our world (Marshall 1985). As such, CPA asks us to pay close attention to broader issues of knowledge, power and truth. It fully recognizes that certain understandings of/about the world are readily accepted as universal “truths” while other perspectives are marginalized and are rendered invisible altogether (Delgado 1989; Prunty 1985; Solórzano and Yosso 2001). CPA not only aims to “expose the sources of domination, repression, and exploitation” (Prunty 1985, p. 136) that allow particular truths to flourish, but also to seek ways to reform those systems in order to work towards a more equitable and just society. Without a doubt, CPA is expressly political (Prunty 1985); it does not shy away from a profound commitment to social justice.

1 Why Is CPA Necessary in Understanding Parent Involvement?

What we are attempting to do in this chapter is take a critical look at issues of parental involvement by interrogating its function and purpose as a “disciplinary” exercise of power, as well as an unquestioned policy construct in today's educational

discourse. To be certain, parental involvement is an everyday/routine phenomenon that is simply taken-for-granted in most schools. School leaders and teachers expect a certain degree of involvement from parents, researchers study better ways to get parents involved, and school reformers and policy makers try to improve schools by setting up systems and policy levers that institutionalize parental involvement as a central component of schooling (Hill and Tyson 2009; Honig et al. 2001). In effect, as an educational community, we not only expect parents to be “involved” in school matters, but demand that their involvement be central to the schooling process. Parental involvement is simply a normal and expected part of the everyday activities in school.

However, when one looks at the research literature, it overwhelmingly suggests that Parents of Color are not involved in the same rate as their White middle-class counterparts (Chavkin 1993; Lee and Bowen 2006; Trotman 2001). This apparent lack of involvement, has not only perplexed the research community, but the practitioner community as well, who constantly search for new and different ways to engage parents and families (Epstein 1995; Horvat and Baugh 2015; Khalifa et al. 2015). In contrast to some of these scholars, we take the position that the “problem” of involvement has very little to do with marginalized parents (who seem uninvolved) or with schools (who seem unable to involve these parents). Rather, we posit that the problem of involvement is a discursive one where very specific/discrete understandings of involvement are recognized and privileged in school settings while other forms of involvement have been marginalized, rendered invisible, or discouraged altogether (López 2001; Young 1999).

In other words, how we define the terrain of legitimate parental involvement actions—as well as the policy and practical structures that privilege particular involvement forms over others—is an important first step in understanding the problem of (under)involvement (Olivos 2009). In this regard, CPA is important in helping us understand the various ways in which particular forms of involvement become privileged and entrenched in schools, and how such practices render certain populations as “uninvolved” in the educational lives of their children (Young 1999).

Moreover, we also believe that the ways in which parental involvement has been operationalized and practiced in schools is a relatively recent phenomenon. This is not to suggest that we believe parental involvement is unimportant or trivial, but rather, that its universality as a pressing area of concern within the field of education is neither time-honored nor established. As an educational community, we tend to take parental involvement for granted, often assuming that the practice of engaging parents and communities in particular ways has always been along-established practice and policy concern within education. We believe that CPA can help us better understand when parental involvement became inscribed in policy (as well as practice) and why it has become such a taken-for-granted notion within the educational community.

As such, CPA helps us to better locate the historiography and contemporary usage of parental involvement as a policy construct, while shedding light on how it shapes and structures current schooling practices. Moreover, it allows us to better understand when parent involvement became a dominant policy concern, while

providing some insights as to why it's such a universal construct within education at this particular point in time. We feel it is critically important to raise such questions about these particular practices rather than simply take them for granted.

With this in mind, this chapter utilizes CPA as an analytical tool in order to push our thinking on the topic of parental involvement while providing us with new possibilities for insight and understanding in this particular area. It should be stated that CPA is not simply an alternative way of “doing” policy analysis. Rather it is a different way of thinking about the role and nature of policy; fully recognizing that the policies that shape and structure our everyday/lived world are not neutral, objective, or value-free (Diem et al. 2014). As such, CPA is not a typical or traditional policy analysis where researchers make policy decisions or recommendations based on an established protocol. Instead, CPA aims to critically interrogate the world around us and shed light on the visible and invisible structures, discourses, and systems that shape our world (Atwood and López 2014; Prunty 1985).

Given this understanding, we use CPA in this chapter to trouble the terrain of parental involvement—both the types of practices and actions that are privileged in the literature as well as in the field (i.e., the “what” of involvement), and the expressed rationale for inscribing involvement within education’s discourse (i.e., the “why” of involvement). We posit that involvement is discursively regulated and controlled by schools and their agents for particular purposes, and that various school actors (administrators, teachers, researchers, policy makers, etc.) frown upon any deviation from this involvement “script.” We contextualize this assertion through an example from a real world case study, showcasing how a group of Latin@ parents organized around particular issues of importance to them, but were increasingly marginalized by the school administration for their grassroots efforts. We then problematize the case study by interrogating the “why” of parental involvement. Lastly, we conclude with some insights surrounding the utility of CPA as a vehicle to understand the discursive nature of parental involvement and how it is used in schools as a mechanism of power and control.

2 Interrogating the “What” of Parental Involvement

The literature surrounding the multiple factors affecting educational outcomes often suggests that a strong relationship exists between parental involvement and high levels of educational success (Jeynes 2014; LaRocque et al. 2011; Núñez et al. 2015). Moreover, educators, practitioners, and policy-makers have certainly touted parental involvement as an important area of study within the educational arena (López 2001).

The different ways in which parents can, and ought to be “involved” was made popular by Joyce Epstein, whose famous typology was popularized in the 1980s (Epstein and Becker 1982; Epstein and Dauber 1989; Epstein 1995). Epstein and her colleagues argued that involvement centered around a specific set of practices

and activities within the home as well as in the school. These activities typically included things like participation in parent-teacher associations (PTA), parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, chaperoning field trips, fundraising, as well as a host of home-based activities and actions (e.g., turning off the television, supervising homework, reading to a child, etc.). Although Epstein insists that her typology was never intended to be prescriptive (Epstein 1995), it quickly became a top choice for researchers, policymakers and practitioners who were looking for a handy way to think about involvement and operationalize its practices. As a result, Epstein's typology has become a dominant trope in the parental involvement research literature (López 2001). Critics argue that Epstein's typology is far too rigid, and perpetuates a singular view of parental involvement that privileges certain parental activities while ignoring others, reaffirming what deCarvalho (2001) describes as a "romanticized view of family/school relationships" (p. 2).

Indeed, the discourse surrounding parental involvement has recently undergone a shift that has problematized the structures and ideologies that perpetuate a homogenized and simplified understanding of parental involvement. Prior to the effort of critical scholars (e.g., deCarvalho 2001; Hong 2011; López 2001; López and López 2010; Olivos 2004, 2006, 2009; Young 1999) the discourse surrounding parental involvement used to focus on the energies of parents within the schooling space or having parents do school-related "acts" within the home. Such a limited view of parental involvement resulted in what Olivos (2006) described as a, "... diluted... laundry list of activities that 'experts' feel good parents (ought to) 'do' to blindly support the schools' agendas" (p. 13). Not only does the laundry list include only those parental actions taking place within the traditional schooling space, but such activities symbolize and reflect White middle-class forms of involvement (Young 1999). In other words, the "laundry list" of idealized involvement activities was created within a system that effectively excluded the actions and involvement forms of historically marginalized parents.

Attempting to include the voices and experiences of parents of color, scholars such as López (2001), thus began to expand the spatial boundaries that restricted the discourse of parental involvement. López (2001) describes traditional parental involvement as actions that are "... transparent [and] relegate[ed]... to a scripted role to be performed" around school-centered activities (p. 417). Notwithstanding, scholars such as Pérez-Carreón et al. (2005) are currently challenging the school-centric view of involvement described by López. For example, Pérez-Carreón and his colleagues (2005) note that, "... parental involvement or engagement needs to be understood through parents' *presence* in their children's schooling, regardless of whether that presence is in a formal school space or in more personal, informal spaces, including spaces created by the parents themselves" (p. 466). This expansive lens of parental engagement has helped to examine and acknowledge the various parental involvement actions of Latin@ parents that often stand outside traditional/discursive configurations as noteworthy and beneficial (Atwood and López 2014; Weaver-Hightower 2008).

More recently, studies exploring Latin@ parental agency found Latin@ parents to be active decision-makers in the educational lives of their children (Carreon et al.

2005; McClain 2010). This set of research studies finds that Latin@ parents often manifest their involvement in more discrete ways: i.e., strategically selecting the schools that their children attend and/or the curriculum that best suits their children's needs/interests (i.e., dual immersion, bilingual, etc.). In effect, Latin@ parents are deeply informed and involved—always aware of their power as decision-makers within the educational sphere. McClain (2010) suggests that Latin@ parental agency in the schooling of their children has “illuminate[d] parents as grassroots educational decision makers, negotiating the borderlands between parents and schools” (p. 3078). The boundary that previously confined Latin@ parental engagement has thus expanded even further, suggesting that Latin@ parents are now actively accessing their power through decision-making efforts within the schooling space.

In recent years, Latin@ parents have been joining forces in order to advocate for change within schools. As a result, schools are being transformed into places where Latin@ parents can organize, acquire knowledge, become critical, and advocate for change. Studies focusing on the empowerment and agency of Latin@ parent collectives have found schools to be both supportive and resistant to the efforts of Latin@ parent groups (Cline and Necochea 2001; DeGaetano 2007; Olivos 2004, 2006, 2009; Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis 2004; Ramirez 2003; Shah 2009). For example, Olivos (2004) found that schools support for parental activism was withdrawn once parents began to advocate for change. In other words, Latin@ parents were not considered a threat by schools and administrators when they were performing their expected involvement “script.” However, once parents began to acquire the political consciousness “necessary to grasp how the school system implicitly (and explicitly) works” and began advocating for change, the support of the school administration magically diminished.

Despite the resistance and fears of schools, Latin@ parents have continued to push for change. Studies have found that Latin@ parent groups have been able to successfully restructure schools and, in some cases, advocate for the removal of school level administrators that were excessively combative and resistant to Latin@ student populations (DeGaetano 2007; Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis 2004; Olivos 2004; Ramirez 2003). More powerful still, have been the efforts of Latin@ parent groups to actively forge and maintain effective partnerships with schools (DeGaetano 2007; Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis 2004). And yet, results from the aforementioned studies reveal that when parents enacted their agency and power to create change, school administrators became resistant. We believe that the resistances to such grassroots efforts can be partially found in what administrators believe are acceptable forms of involvement actions. In other words, when parents violate the unspoken terms of their involvement agreement, school administrators begin to withdraw their support for their involvement. This suggests that the terms, expectations, and norms of involvement are not only discursively bound, but are controlled by school officials who have deemed certain forms of involvement more acceptable than others.

The narrative below provides more insight into this particular disciplinary practice while highlighting the ways in which parental activism was discouraged, regulated, and managed by school administrators. The events in this particular account were taken from a research study that was conducted by the first author

a few years ago. Although the events are real, the names of the school site and research participants are pseudonyms.

2.1 Behind Closed Doors: How One School Regulates Parental Involvement

Franklin Elementary is an urban elementary school in the Midwest located in a district struggling with declining enrollments and student under performance. During the 2013–2014 school year, Franklin had an enrollment of 610 students. Ninety-two percent of students at the school qualified for free or reduced lunch. Of the total student population, 54 % were Black, 39 % were Latin@, 4 % were of Mixed Race origin, and 2 % were White. In addition, 33 % of the students at the school were designated English Language Learners. At the time of the study, the school had yet to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and in 2010, it was designated as a “Turnaround Status” school. This new classification resulted in the hiring of a new principal and many new teachers (51 % of teachers were new to the school). The school was placed on a strict improvement plan by the state, with the understanding that it would close or reconstitute the school if improvement was not achieved within a given timeframe.

Unfortunately, Franklin failed to demonstrate student growth or improvement. During the 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 academic years, Franklin Elementary garnered a grade of an “F” – the lowest grade given to schools by the state. While the repercussions of this designation are unknown (at least at the time of writing this chapter), Franklin Elementary was turned into a Full Service Community School (FSCS) with the assistance of a federal grant and the support of a local university. As a FSCS, Franklin was able to involve and incorporate partnerships with multiple organizations in order to bring social, health, and human services to families in the school community into its daily operations.

Unlike two other schools in the district that were also transformed into FSCSs, Franklin Elementary also served as the ELL “feeder” school for the surrounding community. This meant that any student living within the surrounding community who needed ELL services was assigned and bussed to Franklin Elementary. Additionally, the surrounding community included an increasing number of Spanish-speaking families, most immigrating from Mexico. According to the most current data from the United States Census Bureau website, it is estimated that over the previous 10 years, the Latin@ population in the city more than doubled, comprising approximately 10 % of the city’s population.

Additionally, during the 2010–2011 state legislative session, the state legislature and county governments passed measures targeting undocumented immigrants. The anti-immigration legislation authorized law enforcement officials to question and/or arrest individuals based on their assumed immigration status. To complicate things, state-issued identification cards were no longer issued to undocumented individuals. This had a deleterious impact on an already-vulnerable population.

To make matters worse, counties across the state adopted the Secure Communities Program: a partnership between local law enforcement agencies, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE). This partnership allowed local and federal agencies to share documents (such as fingerprint files) – making it easier for local law enforcement agencies to hold individuals based on their immigration status, thus also making it easier for individuals picked up by police to get transferred to ICE detention.

Passage of the anti-immigration legislation and the establishment of Secure Communities created a hostile and threatening climate for Latin@ immigrants and their families. Simple everyday acts that were previously taken for granted (i.e., parents dropping off children at school, driving to the grocery store, etc.) threatened to separate families. This resulted in many Latin@ families living in the shadows, hiding their immigration status from any agency (including schools) as well as individuals that posed a threat to their well being.

Within the shadows, however, have emerged spaces of hope, dreams, and more importantly, action. Schools, which were often perceived as unwelcoming, marginalizing, cold, and harsh were transformed through parental action into spaces where families, in this case Latin@ families, felt welcomed, appreciated, and acknowledged – particularly as active agents and decision-makers in the daily educational lives of their children. Specifically, in Franklin Elementary, the community room was transformed by Latin@ parents. What once served as a meeting space for community partners became a hub for Spanish-speaking Latin@ immigrant parents. Unfortunately, school administrators failed to acknowledge the time and work spent by Latin@ parents creating and cultivating a welcoming space for Latin@ families as authentic acts of parental engagement. For instance (and as will be discussed later in the chapter), several Franklin school staff (including Mrs. Palmer, the principal) often referred to the parent group as a “social group” – delegitimizing the parent organizing that was taking place within the school. By failing to acknowledge these acts as authentic acts of parental engagement, school administrators further marginalized Latin@ parents while also evading their concerns.

2.1.1 “*Es Como Si Fuera Un Odio/It’s Like a Hatred*”

As noted in the previous section, during the timeframe in which data for the above case was collected, Latin@ families in this region were dealing with the threats and consequences that came with the recently passed immigration policies – deportation and the separation of families. Reflecting on the current state of Latin@s in the U.S., Eva, a Franklin parent, noted:

[Es] como si fuera un odio. Es algo como un refundió que tienen hacia los hispanos. Ustedes la raza latina ellos no la trata de una manera, de gracias de la mano de obra de ellos.

It’s like a hatred. It’s as if they want to recast the Hispanics. They don’t treat Latinos in a manner that thanks them for their labor.

As evidenced by Eva's statement, anti-immigration policies created a space where Latin@ families not only felt unwelcome and unappreciated, but their very livelihood was threatened. Eva suggested that this "odio/hatred" relegated Latin@s to that of a group of people that must be recast. This feeling of being pushed to the margins of society was also felt by other Latin@ families in schools. Flora, a Latina mother, stated, "In the first place, there are many families that say they are fearful of sending their kids to schools. Why? Because of all this of the immigration. The topic of immigration is like a panic." It was this panic surrounding immigration reform that sparked Latin@ parent organizing at Franklin Elementary.

During the Fall of 2010, in an effort to engage targeted groups of parents/guardians, the parent advocates at Franklin Elementary developed and held a series of "study circles" – meetings in which groups convened to learn about, discuss and develop action around issues related to families and students. Miguel, the bilingual parent advocate at Franklin, was charged with convening a study circle with a group of Latin@, Spanish speaking parents.

Three study-circles were held in the community room and brought together parents—mostly mothers—who discussed challenges they faced in common such as fear of deportation and separation of the family. The study circles provided a setting where parents could share experiences, offer examples and suggestions, and identify common barriers for Spanish-speaking immigrant families. In the de-briefing notes, Miguel described the moment when parents realized their ability to support one another. He wrote, "They [Latin@ immigrant parents] saw that they have the answers to the problems and have proposed to keep meeting after the circles." From these study circles emerged a Latin@ parent group, *Padres Unidos/United Parents* who organized around issues related to anti-immigration reform. However, as will be described in the subsequent sections of this chapter, the community room has remained closed and unacknowledged by school administrators. Yet, despite the lack of administrative acknowledgment and support, Latin@ immigrant parents continued to organize behind closed doors, particularly around issues of importance to them.

2.2 *Emerging from the Space*

With the formation of *Padres Unidos*, the participants of the study circles had a new focus and awareness. They recognized that they had concerns that extended beyond the walls of the school. However, they also acknowledged that they possessed knowledge and skills that they could use to help empower and uplift other community members. As a collective, *Padres Unidos* decided to begin taking steps to transform Franklin Elementary into a welcoming space for Latin@ families. Through their initial organizing efforts, *Padres Unidos* decided to construct and display something that honored their heritage and traditions – building an altar for *Día de los Muertos*, as well as bring awareness to the group's formation through a door-knocking campaign.

Franklin Elementary had never experienced anything like this – a parent-initiated, parent-lead, and parent-organized group. Interestingly, school representatives perceived the altar as a “small” gesture from parents within the school. However, parents understood this to be a “loud” message of solidarity and affirmation. Simply put, parents were tired of being ignored and feeling unwelcome within the school and sought to take a stand against the racism that targeted the increasing Latin@ community in the school and surrounding area. After the altar had been constructed, parents from *Padres Unidos* felt a sense of cultural pride and accomplishment that only propelled their momentum and creative energy.

As such, *Padres Unidos* used the third (and last) study circle to establish a tentative plan for the future of the group. De-briefing meeting notes indicate that members decided to meet on a weekly basis and focus meetings around issues that Latin@ immigrant families, parents, and students faced. These issues ranged from bullying to transportation to the unique struggles and challenges facing immigrant populations (immigration reform, know your rights training, etc.). *Padres Unidos* sought to conduct workshops that focused on disseminating specific knowledge to others, with the hope that this would ultimately lead towards transformative change within the school and broader community.

With momentum in the group rising, members of *Padres Unidos* felt that it would be a good time to bring awareness to the group. In order to do this, members of *Padres Unidos* decided to begin a door-knocking campaign that took place during two consecutive Saturdays in the spring of 2011. Because Franklin was the ESL feeder school for many districts, the door-knocking campaign took members to different segments of the city. Parents met at Franklin Elementary early in the morning in order to divide the addresses of Latin@ families that attended the school. Members were then given their materials for the day – identification badges, folders that included information about the group (including a list of weekly meeting topics and visitors), and a short survey that was to be administered by the members of *Padres Unidos* to the targeted families. The parents then divided into small groups and with their children in tow proceeded to knock on doors, bringing attention to not only the group but to Franklin Elementary.

Through the door-knocking campaign and the construction of an altar for *Día de los Muertos*, *Padres Unidos* made Franklin Elementary a more welcoming place for Latin@ immigrant families in the community. However the efforts made by *Padres Unidos* remained at the margins of a school administrators’ agenda. In other words, because the group’s concerns centered predominately around immigration legislation their actions and push for reform within the school were continuously being evaded or ignored by school officials; because according to school officials immigration reform fell outside of the school’s purview.

2.3 Diverging Perceptions

Padres Unidos faced many obstacles, challenges, and hurdles during their first 2 years as an organized parent group at Franklin Elementary. During the 2011–2012 academic school year Mrs. Palmer was appointed principal at Franklin. Almost

immediately, she made it clear that she was under extreme pressure to “turn the school around.” This was further expressed during a school task force when she shared with the group that, “Central office expects me to do in one year what research indicates takes five to seven years.” As such, it became clear that Mrs. Palmer knew the pressures she faced, and was strategic in zeroing in on the topic of student achievement. As a result, anything beyond the purview of her focus was put on the backburner, or in the case of the concerns of *Padres Unidos* completely ignored altogether.

For instance, during a parent leadership training, two members of *Padres Unidos*, raised a concern facing immigrant parents to Mrs. Palmer. Although Latin@ immigrant parents expressed interest in volunteering at the school, district policies required that all parent volunteers be fingerprinted and have a criminal background check. However, because of the anti-immigration legislation in the state, immigrant parents feared that if they got fingerprinted they could face deportation. This was a risk they were unwilling to take. Principal Palmer, responded to the parents’ concern by noting that immigration concerns were outside the school’s responsibility and “the school could not get involved in those matters.” As a result of Mrs. Palmer’s evasiveness, many of the parents of *Padres Unidos* did not feel as though the school and school leaders recognized the group as a legitimate parent group. Miguel explains:

Mrs. Palmer knows that there is a meeting every Wednesday at night. She doesn’t know what is going on in the meetings. I don’t even think she knows that we are teaching parents [how to use] computers. [. . .] It’s been because the relationship has been, “Let them do what they need to do in the community room. As long as they don’t go over 8:30, and as long as they don’t have kids running around in the hallway . . .” Which has been a really good freedom for us because then we can really talk about anything but it hasn’t [. . .], given an acknowledgment from the school about the commitment that the parents have to being engaged and coming and wanting to learn and wanting to be involved.

As Miguel suggested, during Mrs. Palmer’s tenure, *Padres Unidos* were seen within the school but school leaders did not consider them a formally recognized group. In other words, the work of *Padres Unidos*, including the altar they constructed and their door-knocking campaign, remained ambiguous, a fact that both benefited and hindered their efforts. However, by evading immigration concerns Mrs. Palmer positioned the Latin@ immigrant families at her school as second class citizens. As a result of Mrs. Palmer’s decision to evade the topic of immigration, she dismissed the seriousness of the fear and worry that it created among the families and community surrounding her school.

As noted by members of *Padres Unidos*, immigrant families who experienced the traumatic consequences of immigration reform developed a fear and distrust of governmental agencies/agents, including schools. Mrs. Palmer’s response to immigration issues being beyond the scope and capacity of the school’s responsibility only further perpetuated these anxieties and fears, marginalizing Latin@ immigrant families and their concerns. Sadly, Mrs. Palmer only maintained the status-quo of school/family relationships rather than engaging with families. Miguel describes the relationship between *Padres Unidos* and the school as follows:

Well, I think [the school] . . . is just kind of like, “We’ll have translators for you guys but that’s as far as we are going to go.” You know. Changing curriculum or being open to culture coming in, something that presents a different perspective in life, like the celebration of the day of the dead, um that starts kind of threatening people. [. . .] So I think it’s kind of like “We’ll just put you in this corner, we’ll give you your space but stay real quiet over there. And then if we see people starting to make too much trouble then we are not going to accept that.”

Miguel’s impression of the family-school relationship that was established between *Padres Unidos* and the school in many ways reflected the prevailing images of parental engagement. The dominant image in the literature of an “involved” parent is one who is constantly participating in approved school-centered activities – volunteering at the school, attending school-sponsored events, helping their children with homework, etc. The diverging views of *Padres Unidos* and Mrs. Palmer regarding their involvement only highlights the tensions that emerge when parents and school personnel have diverging understandings of involvement.

In the next section, we will focus on why issues of involvement have become more streamlined in recent years while interrogating why and how involvement became closely aligned with the school reform movement. In the example above, the school principal was given a specific set of marching orders: she was tasked to turn the school around and focused her energies on improving student academic outcomes—almost at the expense of everything else. As a result, the principal—feeling the pressure by the state—clearly chose to let the parent organization do their own thing. Adding insult to injury, the alienated parents felt further rejection from the principal when they approached her about their concerns surrounding the fingerprinting policy. Rather than figure out creative ways to get the parent organization back into the fold, the principal felt that immigration concerns were simply not the purview of the school. Sadly, the principal was so caught up in trying to remedy the student performance issue, that she lost a key constituent that could have helped her do just that.

3 Interrogating the “Why” of Parental Involvement

Principal Palmer’s actions can be better understood when one looks at the ways in which parental involvement has been articulated and inscribed within educational policy. We believe that educational policy not only informs what parental involvement ought to “look like” in schools, but in doing so, it delimits the range of acceptable involvement practices. In other words, policies not only shape our impressions of expected parental actions and practices, but also provide visible signposts that determine and shape how schools ought to be working with parents on a day-to-day basis. Nowhere is this more evident than in federal educational policy and legislation.

Before 1983 little, if any, federal attention was given to issues of parental involvement. In fact, it was not until the publication of *A Nation at Risk* when

parental involvement began to take shape at a federal level. Although the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) was tasked with providing a report on the quality of education in America, the report went beyond its Commission by providing a set of “practical recommendations” (p. 1) that presumably would fix the shabby state of American schools and set the nation on a corrective path.

Some of these recommendations addressed parents and students directly, under the guise that “the success of our recommendations does not fall to the schools and colleges alone” (p. 34). More importantly, *A Nation at Risk* did not mince words, arguing that “more important” than the role of faculty members, administrators, and policymakers, was the role of parents and students in the school reform effort:

As surely as you are your child’s first and most influential teacher, your child’s ideas about education and its significance begin with you. You must be a living example of what you expect your children to honor and to emulate. Moreover, you bear a responsibility to participate actively in your child’s education. You should encourage more diligent study and discourage satisfaction with mediocrity and the attitude that says “let it slide”; monitor your child’s study; encourage good study habits; encourage your child to take more demanding rather than less demanding courses; nurture your child’s curiosity, creativity, and confidence; and be an active participant in the work of the schools. Above all, exhibit a commitment to continued learning in your own life. Finally, help your children understand that excellence in education cannot be achieved without intellectual and moral integrity coupled with hard work and commitment. Children will look to their parents and teachers as models of such virtues (p. 35).

With this brief statement, the Commission single-handedly named parental involvement as a focus of concern while formally introducing parental involvement into the national conversation surrounding school reform. More importantly, the Commission not only suggested that parental involvement was a key factor in school reform efforts, but identified the specific ways in which parents could be “involved” in their children’s educational lives. It is these types of directives that shape and influence how we come to know and understand the expected roles of parents in schools.

The topic of parental involvement would again take national stage in 1991 under President George H. W. Bush’s *America 2000: An Education Strategy*. Under *America 2000*, parental “choice” policy levers were formally introduced into the policy arena, paving the way for bolder ideas involving testing, accountability, vouchers/certificates, and the power of parents to use choice as a vehicle to foster educational reform and change: “It’s time parents were free to choose the schools that their children attend. This approach will create the competitive climate that stimulates excellence in our private and parochial schools as well” (Bush 1991). In effect, *America 2000* encouraged parents to vote with their feet in order to force schools to be more accountable to children as well as to hold schools accountable for precious taxpayer dollars. In addition to choice, parental involvement was also articulated in very specific ways, providing guidance and direction for how parents were expected to be involved in the educational process:

Q: What can parents do to help?

A: A thousand things. They are the keys to their children’s education, and there is no part of the AMERICA 2000 Strategy in which they do not have an important role. As for what

they can do *today*—they could read a story to their children, check to see that tonight’s homework is done, thank their child’s teacher, talk with their teachers and principals about how things are going in school, and set some examples for their children of virtuous, self-disciplined and generous behavior. (America 2000, 1991, p. 34)

In contrast to the policy prescriptions outlined in President Reagan’s *A Nation at Risk*, President Bush’s *America 2000 Strategy* shifted the scope of parental involvement beyond the role of passive supporter in the home to one of active involvement in both the school and home fronts. Parents were no longer expected to simply encourage their children, but to be more hands-on and proactive in the schooling process: i.e., engaging in specific/discrete “involvement” activities in the home on the one hand, while promoting a culture of choice and market competition on the other.

In 1994, President Clinton included parental involvement as part of his *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*: “By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children” (*Goals 2000*, Goal 8). Although the initial legislation left the terrain of parental involvement undefined, the *Goals 2000 Policy Guidance Manual* (1996) made it clear that:

Children do best when parents are enabled to play four key roles in their children’s learning: teachers (helping children at home), supporters (contributing their skills to the school), advocates (helping children receive fair treatment), and decision makers (participating in joint problem-solving with the school at every level).

The manual then went on to note that parents were expected to be involved in these four roles at all levels of education, including the state level (“State plan must be developed in consultation with parents, as well as with LEAs, teachers, pupil services personnel, administrators and other staff.”) as well as the local level (“An LEA must develop jointly with, agree upon with, and distribute to parents of participating children a written parent involvement policy that is incorporated into the LEA’s plan.”). The *Goals 2000 Policy Guidance Manual* (1996) further stated that schools not only needed to have a written parental involvement policy, but that such policy would need to detail how the LEA would formally involve parents in all levels of school improvement.

While President Clinton’s *Goals 2000* had a short shelf-life as a federal education legislation, it certainly had a long-lasting impact in profoundly shaping the discourse on parent involvement. If *A Nation at Risk* was a plea for parents to be more involved in the home front and *America 2000* was meant to encourage more meaningful partnerships between home and school, Clinton’s *Goals 2000* was a clarion call for parents to have a more formal seat at the table in both state and local education matters. The policy shift from its previous policy predecessors was certainly evident: parent involvement had become thoroughly inscribed in federal education policy.

While President George W. Bush’s *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 effectively brought a formal end to President Clinton’s *Goals 2000*, it is important to note that many of the parental involvement provisions under *Goals 2000*, were simply incorporated and folded into *NCLB* (in many instances, the language of the parental

involvement policy remained virtually unchanged). However, unlike its policy predecessor, *NCLB* now tied Title I monies to its parental involvement initiatives, meaning that districts and schools, needed to demonstrate how they were meeting the spirit of the law and involving parents in meaningful ways. According to *NCLB*, Section 1118 of Title I:

A local educational agency may receive funds under this part only if such agency implements programs, activities, and procedures for the involvement of parents in programs assisted under this part consistent with this section. Such programs, activities, and procedures shall be planned and implemented with meaningful consultation with parents of participating children.

While LEA's were still responsible for co-developing a written parental involvement policy in consultation with parents under *NCLB*, their responsibilities for ensuring that parents were involved in meaningful ways and in every realm of the educational process grew exponentially. Under *NCLB*, local education agencies were now tasked with the following:

1. Setting aside moneys to co-develop and implement their parental involvement programs,
2. To have an annual meeting where parents are informed of the LEA's parent involvement policy and provided an opportunity to participate along with routes for successful collaboration,
3. To inform parents of the educational progress of their children and extend to parents the opportunity to formulate curricular and pedagogical suggestions for improvement,
4. To develop a school-parent "compact" that explicitly focuses on student achievement and which details how parents will be responsible for supporting their children's academic success,
5. To build capacity for meaningful involvement at the school, including routes for parent education, the development of professional development training materials, and other assistance (e.g., transportation, meals, daycare, etc.) that aim to improve and facilitate parental involvement at the school,
6. To ensure that specific target populations such as ELL parents, parents with special needs, migrant parents, etc. are not left behind or placed at a disadvantage, and
7. To collaborate with state and regional Parent Information Resource Centers on delivering services to parents at the school.

Indeed, parental involvement under *NCLB* was quite a logistical and organizational undertaking. Under *NCLB*, parental involvement became a laundry list of very specific requirements that needed to be met. If schools and/or districts fell short of these requirements, education agencies ran the risk of being sanctioned. Therefore, in order to meet both the language and spirit of the new law, particularly with respect to "meaningful" involvement practices, schools increasingly began to work with state, regional, and national organizations such as The National Network

of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University (Epstein 2005) to identify activities and approaches for parent involvement.

The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS), under the direction of Joyce Epstein, was an important player in disseminating practical information to schools and states surrounding parental involvement policies and practices during this time (Epstein 2004). The Network boasted an impressive roster of about 1000 schools, districts, and states, that received training and guidance in research based practices for involvement:

Schools in NNPS begin with an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP), a committee of the school improvement team. The ATP uses six types of involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community—to ensure that parents have many different ways to become involved at home, at school, and in the community (Epstein 2004, p. 14).

To be certain, Epstein's 6-part typology was comprehensive, and provided schools with multiple entry points for parental involvement. In fact, Epstein and her collaborators (Epstein et al. 2002) identified very specific practices under each of type of involvement, for schools, districts, and states to consider. As a result, Epstein's typology became the "go-to" framework for states and LEA's to fulfill the parental involvement requirements for meaningful involvement under *NCLB*, and rapidly became a staple in the parent involvement discourse.

When one looks at the progression of parent involvement within the federal policy making arena since the publication of *A Nation of Risk*, we can see that involvement became more and more "inscribed" in educational policy with each successive federal law. Moreover, as the policy stakes got higher, parent involvement became increasingly honed and formalized under the threat of sanctions. Given the regulatory functions of *NCLB*, the work done by the National Network of Partnership Schools provided a key policy "link" to help operationalize parental involvement practices via Epstein's 6-part typology of involvement at the state and local levels.

Parent involvement is now at the point where only those practices and actions that correspond to Epstein's typology are recognized and privileged in schools (Howard and Reynolds 2008; López 2001). In other words, parent involvement has become homogenous and uniform across public school settings. It has now reached a point of discursivity: where parental involvement is so common, and so universally understood that it needs no definition or description (Olivos 2009). We simply take involvement as for granted and as a universal given. As educators, administrators, policy makers, researchers and scholars, we implicitly "know" what parental involvement is, what it looks like, and what it *supposed* to look like in a school setting. Parents who behave badly are those who do not subscribe to our pre-existing understandings of involvement, or whose involvement forms stand outside discursive configurations. However, as we've discussed in this chapter, our very understandings of "involvement" did not occur naturally. Rather, there were very specific policy levers and institutional players that "naturalized" certain forms of involvement practices over others.

4 Implications of Using Critical Policy Analysis

Critical Policy Analysis reminds us that policies are both visible and invisible; simultaneously textual and discursive (Weaver-Hightower 2008; Young 1999). In other words, the politics of the everyday—what we experience, know, witness, and take for granted on a “day-to-day” basis—is not objective or neutral, but discursively formed (Atwood and López 2014; Weaver-Hightower 2008). They are powerful ideological constructs that shape and influence our understanding of the world. CPA reminds us that our job, as critical policy scholars, is to interrogate the world around us in order to better understand the various structures, discourses, and systems that shape our world and give it life. It also calls for us to recognize how these discourses contribute to inequitable outcomes in order to rethink what we take for granted and radically transform our world.

In this chapter, we have examined how issues of parental involvement are not only informed by federal education policies, but are reinforced by local policy actors who seemingly take particular forms of involvement for granted. We have applied the tenets of CPA in order to better understand what constitutes the terrain of acceptable parental involvement behaviors and why school officials continue to privilege a very narrow set of parental practices and actions in their everyday work. Moreover, our case study highlights the ways in which this process unfolds at the building level and how parental actions that stand outside traditional/discursive configurations are not only invalidated but are rarely recognized as legitimate forms of involvement.

Indeed, we have demonstrated that involvement is not only discursively situated, but that school agents rely on this discursive script to make decisions about “appropriate” parental actions in schools. This is not to suggest that school personnel (and other educational actors) are acting out of spite or ill-will, but that they rarely question their own understandings of involvement and do not take the time to understand the various systems that inform their world views about these matters. As critical educators and scholars, it is important that we raise fundamental questions about our own taken-for-granted assumptions and shed light on the discourses that shape our world and our understanding of phenomena within it. CPA not only challenges us to see the world differently, but to take critical action to change our practices so that we don’t continue to perpetuate inequities in our profession as well as in our daily lives.

References

- America. (2000). *An education strategy*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Atwood, E., & López, G. R. (2014). Let’s be critically honest: Towards a messier counter story in critical race theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(9), 1134–1154.
- Ball, S. J. (1994). *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Brewer, C. A. (2014). Historicizing in critical policy analysis: The production of cultural histories and micro histories. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27, 273–288.
- Bush, G. H. W. (1991, April). *Remarks by the President at presentation of national education strategy*. Washington, DC: White House.
- Carreon, G. P., Drake, C., & Barton, A. C. (2005). The importance of presence: Immigrant parents' school engagement experiences. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42(3), 465–498.
- Chavkin, N. F. (1993). *Families and schools in a pluralistic society*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Cline, Z., & Necochea, J. (2001). ¡Basta Ya! Latino parents fighting entrenched racism. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25(1–2), 89–114.
- deCarvalho, M. E. (2001). *Rethinking family-school relations: A critique of parental involvement in schooling*. Mahwah: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- DeGaetano, Y. (2007). The role of culture in engaging Latino parents' involvement in School. *Urban Education*, 42(2), 145–162.
- Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87, 2411–2441.
- Diem, S., Young, M. D., Welton, A. D., Mansfield, K. C., & Lee, P. L. (2014). The intellectual landscape of critical policy analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(9), 1068–1090.
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701.
- Epstein, J. L. (2004). Meeting NCLB requirements for family involvement. *Middle Ground*, 8(1), 14–17.
- Epstein, J. L. (2005). Attainable goals? The spirit and letter of the *No Child Left Behind Act* on parental involvement. *Sociology of Education*, 78(2), 179–182.
- Epstein, J. L., & Becker, H. J. (1982). Teachers' reported practices of parent involvement: Problems and possibilities. *The Elementary School Journal*, 83(2), 103–113.
- Epstein, J. L., & Dauber, S. L. (1989). *Teacher attitudes and practices of parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools* (Report no. 32). Baltimore: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools.
- Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., & Van Voorhis, F. L. (2002). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. Retrieved from <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/103/hr1804>
- Hill, N. E., & Tyson, D. F. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, 45(3), 740–763.
- Hong, S. (2011). *A cord of three strands: A new approach to parent engagement in schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Honig, M., Kahne, J., & McLaughlin, M. (2001). School-community connections: Strengthening opportunity to learn and opportunity to teach. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. 998–1028). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Horvat, E. M., & Baugh, D. E. (2015). Not all parents make the grade in today's schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(7), 8–13.
- Howard, T. C., & Reynolds, R. (2008). Examining parent involvement in reversing the underachievement of African American students in middle-class schools. *Educational Foundations*, 22(1), 79–98.
- Jasis, P., & Ordóñez-Jasis, R. (2004). Convivencia to empowerment: Latino parent organizing at La Familia. *High School Journal*, 88(2), 32–42.
- Jeynes, W. (Ed.). (2014). *Family factors and the educational success of children*. New York: Routledge.

- Khalifa, M., Arnold, N. W., & Newcomb, W. (2015). Understand and advocate for communities first. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(7), 20–25.
- LaRocque, M., Kleiman, I., & Darling, S. M. (2011). Parental involvement: The missing link in school achievement. *Preventing School Failure*, 55(3), 115–122.
- Lee, J. S., & Bowen, N. K. (2006). Parent involvement, cultural capital, and the achievement gap among elementary school children. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(2), 193–218.
- López, G. R. (2001). The value of hard work: Lessons on parent involvement from an (im)migrant household. *Harvard Educational Review*, 71(3), 416–437.
- López, M. P., & López, G. R. (2010). *Persistent inequality: Contemporary realities in the education of undocumented Latina/o students*. New York: Routledge.
- Marshall, C. (1985). Facing fundamental dilemmas in education systems. *Education and Urban Society*, 18(1), 131–134.
- Marshall, C. (1999). Researching the margins: Feminist critical policy analysis. *Educational Policy*, 13(1), 59–76.
- McClain, M. (2010). Parental agency in educational decision making: A Mexican American experience. *Teachers College Record*, 112(12), 3074–3101.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform: A report to the nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education*. Washington, DC: The Commission.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, P.L. 107–110, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2002).
- Núñez, J. C., Suárez, N., Rosário, P., Vallejo, G., Valle, A., & Epstein, J. L. (2015). Relationships between perceived parental involvement in homework, student homework behaviors, and academic achievement: Differences among elementary, junior high, and high school students. *Metacognition and Learning*, 10(3), 375–406
- Olivos, E. M. (2004). Tensions, contradictions, and resistance: An activist's reflection of the struggles of Latino parents in the public school system. *High School Journal*, 87(4), 25–35.
- Olivos, E. M. (2006). *The power of parents: A critical perspective of bicultural parent involvement in public schools*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Olivos, E. M. (2009). Collaboration with Latino families: A critical perspective of home-school interactions. *Intervention in School & Clinic*, 45(2), 109–115.
- Pérez-Carreón, G., Drake, C., & Barton, A. C. (2005). The importance of presence: Immigrant parents' school engagement experiences. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42(3), 465–498.
- Policy Guidance for Title I, Part A: Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies*. (1996). Available: https://www2.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA/Title_I/parinv.html
- Prunty, J. J. (1985). Signposts for a critical educational policy analysis. *Australian Journal of Education*, 29(4), 133–140.
- Ramirez, F. (2003). Dismay and disappointment: Parental involvement of Latino immigrant parents. *The Urban Review*, 35(2), 93–110.
- Shah, P. (2009). Motivating participation: The symbolic effects of Latino representation on parent school involvement. *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(1), 212–230.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: Counter-storytelling Chicana and Chicano graduate school experiences. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(4), 471–495.
- Trotman, M. F. (2001). Involving the African American parent: Recommendations to increase the level of parent involvement within African American families. *Journal of Negro Education*, 70(4), 275–285.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1991). *America 2000: An education strategy*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Weaver-Hightower, M. B. (2008). An ecology metaphor for educational policy analysis: A call to complexity. *Educational Researcher*, 37(3), 153–167.
- Young, M. D. (1999). Multifocal educational policy research: Toward a method for enhancing traditional educational policy studies. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36(4), 677–714.