A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN LATIN AMERICAN FAMILIES IN TORONTO

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Master of Arts (2011)

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Abstract

This study explores the conceptions and practices of parent involvement in education that exist among Latin American families with students in Toronto Schools. The individual and collective life histories of 3 immigrant families from Latin America were collected in order to understand how parents and students conceive of parents’ role the education of their children. The findings of this research demonstrate that families’ conceptions are much broader and expansive than what is currently defined as parent involvement within policy and practice in Ontario and are informed by their educational trajectory in their home country and throughout the migration process and their ideas on education. This research serves to shed light on the experiences of Latin American families in their interactions with educational institutions and gives voice to their experiences, ideas and aspirations in their new home.
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*Appreciation is a wonderful thing. It makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well.*

_Voltaire_

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Chapter 1
Introduction

*A child educated only at school is an uneducated child.*
*George Santayana*

*Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.*
*Proverbs 22:6 NASB*

1.1 Background and Statement of the Problem

Canada’s demographic landscape continues to increase in diversity as generations of immigrants continue to settle here. This growing diversity raises many questions in a variety of academic fields from law to economics, health and education. The intersection of immigration and education is of notable interest to members of the first migratory wave and subsequent generations. For many families the decision to migrate is often associated with a desire to provide their children with educational opportunities in the country of settlement. The process of immigration can be disorganizing at many levels. In terms of education, the move from one nation to another can be a discontinuous experience (Delgado-Gaitan 1991) for students because of the differences in language, values, and cultural practices. The education of immigrant children and youth has been a particularly salient concern in Toronto in recent years (Brown 2006, Anisef et al 2008, Duffy 2003). Toronto is often lauded as the most diverse city in the world. Yet, factions of this diversity increasingly face the challenges of low levels of achievement in education, high rates of early school leaving and low representation in postsecondary studies. It appears that while families who immigrate to Canada are motivated by high educational aspirations for their children, these aspirations are left unfulfilled as their children travel through the educational system.

The education of immigrant, ethnic minority students can be approached from many angles across a variety of disciplines. This project aims to explore the aspect of the relationship between immigrant families and schools, in particular Latin American families in Toronto schools. The relationship between families and schools is a complex and dynamic one. As two of the main institutions in which children spend the greatest
proportion of time and which have the greatest influence on them, it is only natural that
the interaction of these two actors would be of great importance to the educational
endeavor. However, the relationship between families and schools is not an easy one.
Like any other actors engaging within the same space with something valuable
(children’s education) at stake, this comes as no surprise. The difficulties originate at the
very meaning of the concept. What is the relationship between schools and families or as
it is often called “parent involvement in education”? What does parent involvement
mean? This primary dilemma is what Fullan (1982) signals as the core contention at the
heart of this issue. He also argues that all the scholarship that exists on parent
involvement deems it a necessary and beneficial part of quality education. The difficulty
in attaining a shared understanding of the relationship by all the parties involved makes
this aspect of teaching and learning an important topic to pursue. For children and
families who have immigrated to Canada and are navigating new cultural, social and
educational environments, it is very pressing to determine a clear understanding by all
parties involved of what the relationship entails. This is not an easy task considering the
contingent issues such as variations across cultures, classes, races and experiences and
issues of power- its balance and distribution-and misconceptions. This research is
concerned with exploring these existing contingencies from the perspectives of students
and parents and using this knowledge to inform effective parent involvement policy and
practice that includes the diversity of conceptions of parent involvement as part of a
larger project of creating equitable educational experiences.

1.2 Parent Involvement: Ontario Context

The issue of parent involvement continues to be a central concern within the policy
context of Ontario and the educational context of Toronto. In early 2006, the Ministry of
Education unveiled the first Parent Involvement Policy in the province of Ontario. This
policy was developed based on the Parent Voice in Education Project (PVEP), a council
of parent leaders chosen by then Minister Gerard Kennedy which consulted with parents
across the province of Ontario and concluded that parents desired to have a voice in the
education of their children but still felt largely excluded. The Parent Involvement Policy
emerged in response to the findings of the PVEP. The policy invokes the importance of
parent involvement in education that is well documented in educational literature in Canada and around the world (Ministry of Education 2005).

The policy included $ 5.2 Million in investment distributed among 3 areas of funding:

• School Councils for Parent Involvement Activities - $500.00 per school council

The Royal Commission on Learning’s 1995 report recommended amendments to the Education Act that would require all schools in Ontario to create and maintain school councils (Ministry of Education, 2001). In response to these recommendations, the Ministry of Education and Training issued Policy/Program Memorandum No. 122 which mandated that all school boards should develop a policy for the creation and maintenance of school councils in each of their schools by June 2006 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001) as a strategy to encourage collaboration between home and school. These funds were to be used as a base mobilization budget to support communication and engagement activities of the council.

• Parents Reaching Out Grants for School Councils – maximum $1,000 to be awarded in funding contests. This grant program offers funding to school councils for projects that enhance the participation of parents who face challenges in getting involved in their children’s education due to language, recent immigration, poverty and newness to the system.

• Parents Reaching Out Regional/Provincial Grants – maximum $30,000

This grant program offers funding to school boards and parent organizations for regional and provincial projects to enhance parent involvement.

A Ministry-produced discussion paper on the new policy explained that parent involvement was to become a new performance measure in the publicly funded education system. However, this same discussion paper also places much of the responsibility for the success of this new policy on the shoulders of parents. Within the policy parent involvement is defined as: good parenting, helping with homework, serving on school councils and board or provincial committees, communicating and meeting with teacher and volunteering in the classroom or on school trips (Ministry of Education, 2005). Thus
it would appear that parents who face challenges to parent involvement are those that do not visibly engage in these kinds of activities.

In a recent piece by Kugler and Flessa (2007) of OISE UT’s Centre for Urban Schooling, they evaluate the effectiveness of this policy by examining it alongside other provincial directives such as literacy and numeracy. In speaking with principals in challenging areas of Toronto’s education system, the researchers repeatedly heard about the difficulty in achieving the goal of parent and community involvement. Parents were portrayed as deficient and parent and community involvement was viewed as something that Principals expected to be absent in their schools. The authors argue that this response would be completely unacceptable in regards to other curriculum and instruction focuses such as numeracy and literacy. They assert that parent involvement although mandated by the province is seen not as a challenge that needs to be addressed creatively but rather as a losing battle. Although the province has provided funding there is nothing supporting this policy initiative in the way of professional development or staffing positions as with other policies. Similarly, there is no accountability mechanism for the policy. This highlights some of the major challenges of the policy. However, a further challenge which arises in Kugler and Flessa’s (2007) analysis and which is the focus of this proposed inquiry; this is the issue of which parents are excluded from this policy and its particular conceptions of parent involvement. In other words, while it appears that this policy aims to be inclusive it in fact acts to exclude a large number of parents by restricting the conceptions of parent involvement and ignoring the conceptions that parents might bring to the table. In other words it is a one sided perspective of parent involvement from the institutional side of the equation which includes only school and school actors’ conceptions of the relationship between home and school.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education in Ontario released an updated Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools titled Parents in Partnership. This document represents one aspect of the official discourse regarding parent involvement in Ontario and Toronto while also highlighting the position of the official discourse on the topic of parent involvement within Ontario schooling. The vision of the parent engagement policy as articulated in the Ministry document states:
In Ontario’s education system, all partners acknowledge the positive impact of parent engagement on student achievement. Students are supported and inspired to learn in a culture of high expectations in which parents:

- are welcomed, respected and valued by the school community as partnering in their children’s learning and development;
- have opportunities to be involved, and also a full range of choice about how to be involved, in the educational community to support student success;
- are engaged through ongoing communication and dialogue with other educational partners to support a positive learning environment at home and at school
- are supported with the information and tools necessary to participate in school life. (Ministry of Education 2010, p. 7)

While it is encouraging to see a focus at the policy level on the importance of including parents in the educational experience of students this document remains too new to be evaluated fairly at this time. Nevertheless, there are some aspects of the document that I would like to highlight that serve to set the context for this project. For instance, I find that some distance exists between the vision of the policy articulated near the beginning and the practices detailed later in the document. For example, the opportunity for parents to be involved in their children’s education in a variety of ways is certainly a positive model for including a diversity of understandings of parent involvement. However, in the section of the document wherein the implications of the policy are discussed only traditional forms of parent involvement are mentioned. The document states:

The policy acknowledges all aspects of the important parent role in education. These include providing home conditions that support children as learners at all grade levels and supporting parent peers, and taking parent leadership roles. Some parents play a leadership role and serve on schools councils, Parent Involvement Committees (PICs), or Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs). Some volunteer for field trips or help with various school activities. Parents meet with teachers to discuss their children’s needs progress, and goals, and they attend assemblies, read to their children every night or talk to them about their school day. These activities all reflect engaged parents who are contributing to their children’s education. (p.11)
While the intention seems to be to value a diverse array of parent involvement conceptions and practices, the ones described in this excerpt and throughout the rest of the document appear constrained to what could be viewed as already existing formal channels of parent involvement. One key aspect that is missing from this menu of parent involvement practices is any mention of conflict between families and schools. All of the activities described here exist within a home-school relationship that makes no mention of or leaves no room for conflict. That is to say the school and its actors are perfectly aligned in their goals, purposes and actions with the home and its actors. This framing of home-school relationships fails to acknowledge the different and perhaps opposing cultural values that may exist and be promoted within the homes of racial or ethnic minority students or working class students or any student whose home education is divergent from the mainstream culture and consequently school.

The discrepancy between the visions of the this policy document and the potential reality of practices on the ground and the experiences of parents can be explained by the opposing conceptions of parent involvement that exist within the official discourse on parent involvement and unofficial discourses of parent involvement possessed by parents and other actors. For example even the way parents are constructed within in the document is evidence of the conception of parent involvement that exists in the official discourse. The document continually places parents in the category of “partners” as evidenced even in the title of the publication. Within the policy itself it states:

The Parent Engagement policy is grounded in a vision of parents that acknowledges their importance both as valued partners and active participants in their children’s education. (p. 7).

While this conception may be a positive one the question that needs to be posed is whether this is how parents conceive of themselves as actors within their children’s education as evidenced by their actions. The posing and answering of this question is a central aim of this project.
1.3 Parent Involvement: Toronto Context

Within the context of Toronto, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has also directed its attention to parents with the release of data from its board wide parent survey of K-6 schools. The results of this data show some interesting trends that are relevant as background for the proposed study. The parent survey collected information from parents on a number of areas; the one most relevant to this work is parent involvement. In this section parents were asked to rate how welcoming the school was for parents; the frequency of their participation in teacher-parent interviews and meetings and events at the school; their interactions with teachers and volunteer participation at the school (TDSB 2009). While this appears to be a broad range of activities, in fact it represents quite a limited view of parent involvement which are concentrated at the school site and do not demonstrate a clear link to student achievement and success. As Fullan (1992) argues while parent involvement has been deemed a necessary and beneficial part of education for young people its clear definition is a matter of contention as is its connection to specific outcomes. Furthermore, the activities are listed but there is no data which shows who initiates the contact or what might be the quality of the contact. As Henry (1996) asserts parents’ presence in school does not mean parents and educators work well together or equally share decision-making.

The mandate of the Ontario government in regards to parent involvement and the TDSB’s recent parent survey while grounded in the best of intentions to cultivate home and school relations is only one aspect of the complex discussion of parent involvement. These sources can be identified as part of the official discourse on the subject. The official discourse is that which is employed by the institutional bodies and their members on a certain subject. This discourse acts to limit the definition and conceptualization of parent involvement through restricting the practices that are included. It appears that the definition of parent involvement and its impact is limited to those activities that take place on school grounds and serve the school’s agenda for the purpose of student success within the classroom. Lawson (2003) identifies this conception as school-centric because of its focus on activities determined and developed within the school site. He distinguishes this conception from conceptions of parent involvement which exist within...
the community and are more complex in their approach and purpose. Community-centric parent involvement first of all comes from parents operationalizing of parent involvement and is focused more on the needs of students and a struggle for their success and the strengthening of the community over the needs of school and teachers. In other words, this type of involvement begins in the community (perhaps within families themselves) and goes out into the schools. Gordon & Nocon (2008) make the valid point that although parent involvement in the form of governance serves to democratize the process of schooling, this does not always serve the purpose of equity. This is particularly the case for ethnic minority, working class and immigrant parents. Gordon & Nocon (2008) conclude that when parents are treated as a monolithic entity through the polices and practices of educational systems, rather than school improvement, segregation and social exclusion is created. This leads me to conclude that we need to re-examine the policy that has been established to support parent involvement and give parents a voice in education (Ministry of Education 2005) whether it is indeed broad and inclusive or too limiting in its idea of who can be involved and how.

To this end, I wish to explore the conceptions of parent involvement that exist within Latin American families with children in the Toronto Area. Latin Americans in Canada are a unique group. While they share some similar experiences with the demographic in the United States in general they have a very distinct experience. They are a very diverse group in so far as their countries of origin, cultural practices, modes of integration and experiences in Canada (Mata 1985, Garay 2000, Simmons 1993, Ginieniewicz & Schugurensky 2007). In fact, their grouping as an ethnic minority community is based on flexible and changing limits at best; premised on shared language, (some aspects of) shared culture and a colonial history with Spain (Hidalgo 1998).

### 1.4 Latin Americans in Canada

According to the 2006 Census there are 304,245 Latin Americans in Canada with most of them concentrated in the large cities of Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. This is an increase of 40.2% according to the Statistics Canada since 2001. However, this figure may not be accurate. In 2001, Census data estimated the population of Hispanic origin individuals at 212,000 people. At the request of the Hispanic Canadian Congress,
Statistics Canada employing a new definition of "Hispanic" re-analyzed the original data. This new definition included:

- ethnic origin linked to a Spanish-speaking country
- Spanish as a first language
- birth (either their own or their parents) in a Spanish-speaking country.

Using these new criteria, Statistics Canada found that the number of Hispanics in Canada was actually 520,260 (Ginieniewicz & Schugurensky 2007).

Yet even this new definition is exclusive in its scope. The term “Hispanic” includes Spanish immigrants but excludes Brazilians. The term “Latin American” includes those from Brazil but excludes those from Spain. It is pertinent to note that this definition of “Hispanic” includes Spanish immigrants and excludes Brazilians (Ginieniewicz & Schugurensky 2007)¹. This highlights the flexible boundaries of this group within the larger diversity of Toronto. Excluded from both the original figure and the new total are those individuals who did not identify themselves as Hispanic and those who did not participate in the census because of undocumented status (a condition prevalent among Hispanics in Canada) or other situations (Ginieniewicz & Schugurensky 2007).

Thus, the figures from the 2006 Census can also be brought into question based on the previous Census miscalculations. Ginieniewicz & Schugurensky (2007) argue that considering the population growth since 2001 and particularly the growth in ethnic minority populations, the number of Latin Americans in Canada might currently be approaching 700,000; a figure that several community agencies cite as well. They also point out that Factor Hispano, a Spanish-language magazine, has gathered data that places Latin Americans as the 3rd largest ethnic minority group in Canada. Considering these factors, several community associations have affirmed that there are now approximately 700,000 Latin Americans residing in Canada, and some observers estimate the number will soon reach one million.

¹ Within this document the term Latin American will be used to refer to the study group except where a source document employs another term (i.e. Hispanic, Spanish-speaking, Latino, etc.).
The nearly 100,000 Latin Americans Statistics Canada approximates are in Toronto are as diverse as the national group. In spite of their many differences, one thing that has brought this community together, however, is its concern for the education of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation. Being identified as one of the groups with one of the highest drop-out rates in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB 2006) has caused many parents, educators, community groups and Spanish-speaking immigrant serving organizations to focus on the issue of education approaching it from a number of different avenues (Schugurensky et al. 2008). The educational challenges that Latin American students face point to a broader disengagement with the institutions and processes of education. This disengagement, however, is a complex process with multiple factors among which exist a number of varied relationships.

1.5 Research Questions

Parent involvement in education is an important factor in the prevention of early school leaving among minority youth. Parent involvement can also serve other positive goals in addition to the mitigation of early school leaving. From a broad stance, looking beyond academic achievement, a more holistic approach to the education of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation includes the fostering of a strong bicultural identity, the cultivation of strong families and the strengthening of communities (Portes & Rumbaut 2006). These goals could be achieved through parent involvement in education but in order to do this parent involvement must be conceived of more broadly than the practices outlined in the official discourse and traditional expectations of schools. The conception of parent involvement currently employed can be expanded through the inclusion of practices that minority families engage in that support the education of their children. The possibilities of this conception of parent involvement are exciting, especially when we look at our southern neighbors and see the expressions of these conceptions as challenging dominant notions of deficit in Latino families (Delgado-Gaitan 1994). But do these conceptions of parent involvement exist within Latin American families in Toronto? The aforementioned TDSB Parent Survey (TDSB 2009) collected data on racial/ethnic based statistics. The report from this survey claims that Latin American parents, as defined by the Toronto District School Board, reported a rate of 87% satisfaction with the education provided for
their children within the education system. In terms of parent involvement, the survey reported that Latin American parents were engaged in parent involvement at rates higher than other ethnic minority groups and close to what White parents reported, except in the area of volunteering which was low for all groups. While this data is helpful, there are some problems with the tools of the Parent Survey and the assumptions that it makes. Firstly, the survey tool that was to be completed did not include any Latin American countries in the section asking where children or parents were born. Although, the section on first language or language most spoken included Spanish, this may not have been sufficient to ensure accurate data collection. Many 2nd generation Latin American-Canadians would identity their first language and language most spoken as English, combined with their place of birth as Canada this renders them virtually invisible. The TDSB Parent Survey (2009) and Student Survey (2006) report that 2% of the student population in the TDSB is Latin American, however, with the above observations on data collection techniques these figures are largely called into question. Additionally, it seems incredible that a population who has the 3rd highest early school leaving rate in the TDSB would find itself largely satisfied with the education their children are receiving.

Although, this survey was conducted with parents of elementary school children (K-6), there appears to be a mismatch between the reported levels of involvement of parents (acknowledged as supporting student achievement and success) and the performance of students from this ethnic community in later years of schooling. One possible conclusion for these inconsistencies might be drawn back to the conceptions of parent involvement that are articulated in the official discourse at the provincial and board level. If, as the Ontario policy assumes parents of diverse origins, languages and socioeconomic classes such as Latin Americans face particular challenges to parent involvement (Ministry of Education 2005), why is this not evident in the data of the large urban school board which receives most of the immigrant population of Canada and contains 1/3 of the Latin American population? Similarly, what parent involvement practices exist among Latin American families which are excluded from educational policy and practice, but could be potentially transformative in the educational lives of Latina/o students? How can the Ontario Parent Involvement Policy support the development of broader and more empowering forms of parent involvement that include and value the strengths, knowledge
and experience that Latin American families bring to the education of their children? This study aims to illuminate some of these questions and concerns through exploring the life histories of 3 Latin American families in Toronto. Parents enter into their relationships with school with a pre-determined concept of schooling and their role in it. This is what Chrispeels (2001) calls the “sense of place”. This conception of their role and positioning is constructed from their own previous schooling experiences as well as those of their children, cultural beliefs and practices around schooling and other influential experiences. Parents’ sense of place or their understandings of their role in their children’s education can also be influenced through educational intervention programs that provide them with opportunities to learn about the education system and participation in a wide range of activities (Chrispeels 2001). A life history approach will allow for family members to express their conceptions of parent involvement in their children’s education as well as the sources of these conceptions by looking to their experiences.

The topical life history interviews will aim to answer the following research questions:

What conceptions of parent involvement have evolved throughout past experiences in their home countries and since arriving in Toronto for Latin American families?

How are these conceptions and the practices that they inform influenced by the experiences of Latin American families in Toronto before, during and after immigrating to Canada?

How do these conceptions and practices of parent involvement connect with or contradict the official discourse of parent involvement in the province of Ontario?

The implications of these questions and their potential responses extend broadly. The existence of a broader conception of parent involvement, if expressed by members of Latin American families, might require an alternative approach to the model of parent involvement invoked by the official discourse and enacted within schools. A possible
broader conception also has implications for the training of teachers and the vision of the “work” that they do both inside and outside the classroom. Through its examination of the conceptions and practices of parent involvement in one ethnic minority group the exclusionary limits of the current Ontario Parent Involvement Policy and local school boards’ enactment of this policy might be uncovered and challenged. For Latin American families, the legitimization of a broader conception might give voice to practices which have been considered deficient in comparison with narrower ideas of parent involvement. Valencia & Black (2002) call for “scholars to be steadfast in debunking the myth that [Latinos] don’t value education” (p.99) and warn that “we often have to deconstruct inaccurate and unsound works before we can construct new works” (p.99). This study aims to accomplish both of these aims within a new Canadian context. Most importantly, however, through re-imagining the school-home relationship in collaboration with families of color perhaps we can find a new approach to the home-school relationship that is both inclusive of ethnic minority parents and empowering to students as we attribute value to their experiences, strengths and knowledge.

The organization of the thesis is as follows: in Chapter 2 I will outline the theoretical foundations from which I drew in the development of this project, its questions and approaches to answering these. In Chapter 3 I will review the existing academic literature that exists on the topic of parent involvement both broadly and focusing on minoritized students and families in order to situate this work within a broader context. Chapter 4 will detail the methodology employed for this project including its epistemological foundations as well as how it was used in the context of this particular work. Chapter 5, 6 and 7 detail the life histories of the 3 participant families. In chapter 8 I will discuss my findings gleaned from the life history data collected for this project. Finally, in Chapter 9 I will offer some final remarks as well as suggest future research directions in this area.
Chapter 2
Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, I wish to outline the theoretical sources which have informed my thinking and approach to the study throughout the methodological and analytical stages of this project. For this research, I have drawn on the insights of Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Theory. These theoretical approaches have operated as useful lenses in broaching the subject of home-school relationships among Latin American families as I have drawn on certain aspects of the theories and combined them to complement each other while building on the established work of scholars in each of these respective fields. After a brief description of the main tenets of each of these theoretical positions, I will discuss the rationale for their suitability to this work as well as challenges and questions that these theoretical positions raise in regards to this work.

2.1 Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a field that developed as a branch of and in response to scholarship in the field of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) (Ladson-Billings 1998, Tate 1997). CLS consists of a leftist scholarly movement within jurisprudence which focuses on the legal ideology and discourse that lends legitimacy to and reproduces the structure of US society (Ladson-Billings 1998). CLS scholars vigorously critiqued major ideological tenets of US society, yet did not offer constructive conceptions of alternative societal arrangements (Ladson-Billings 1998). CRT emerged in relation to CLS as scholars considered that CLS did not engage with issues of race sufficiently (Ladson-Billings 1998, Tate 1997). Thus, CRT was borne out of and in response to CLS.

Tate (1997), in his piece on CRT and Education for the annual Review of Research in Education, returns to the sources of CRT and reviews the work of influential scholars including Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado and Kimberle Crenshaw. His work is useful in outlining the major tenets of CRT, yet it is important to note that Ladson-Billings (1998) highlights Crenshaw’s assertion that no particular method or writing or set of ideas is clearly CRT. The major goal of CRT scholarship is the elimination of racial
subordination as part of a larger aim to eradicate all forms of oppression (Tate 1997). Nevertheless, a number of CRT scholars have outlined principles that they identify as being those that act to guide scholars in this vein (Tate 1997, Solorzano & Yosso 2002, Ladson-Billings 1995, Dixson & Rousseau 2006). There are 5 significant themes or principles that guide CRT scholarship:

1. Racism as endemic. This assertion operates as the starting point of CRT analysis. It views racism not as simply individual acts but rather as systemic and structural forces that shape society. Due to its structural presence, racism has been normalized and naturalized to the point of being rendered invisible.

Race is a central aspect of the analytical position of CRT. Yet, it should be noted that other factors that contribute to social inequity are important aspects of CRT analysis as well. CRT scholars assert that alone, these factors are not sufficient to explain the social inequity that exists and that race is a central factor that acts to unify multiple factors (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). The intersection of race with other elements of subordination such as class, gender, language, surname and immigration status among others is termed the inter-centricity of race (Solorzano & Yosso 2002). Thus CRT works to center issues and discussions of race.

2. CRT challenges dominant ideology. Tate (1997) highlights that CRT scholarship offers a critique of both conservative and liberal ideologies. Dominant claims (or as CRT identifies them dominant narratives) of neutrality, meritocracy, objectivity and color blindness are identified as camouflages for the maintained of self-interest, power and privilege among the dominant group.

3. To accomplish this act of unmasking, CRT utilizes a variety of tools from different fields including but not limited to law, social science, ethnic studies and sociology. Instruments from this choice of fields are used complementarily to understand more deeply the effects of various structures of oppression in society.

4. CRT challenges an ahistorical analysis and promotes a historical and contextual approach to understanding current social inequities.
5. CRT brings to the foreground the experiences of people of color as central to the analysis of social inequities. This informs the methods that are frequently used in CRT scholarship such as storytelling, family history, biographies and other narratives. This works to provide the contextual element that CRT advocates for and also challenges the claims of objectivity and neutrality by highlighting experiences that largely differ from the accepted “norm”.

2.2 Latina/o Critical Theory

As CRT has grown as a field, offshoots from the main core have developed. One of these is Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit). Solorzano & Yosso (2002) in their examination of CRT and LatCrit methodology in education research define LatCrit along the same aforementioned tenets as CRT but with a focus on the experiences of Latinas/os in particular. Likewise, Stefanic (1997) in her review of the literature in the vein of LatCrit points to the need for LatCrit Theory because both conventional and critical approaches to race ignore the more nuanced racial experiences of Latinas/os. In the case of Latinos the issue of race is a particularly salient one because of the ambiguity that exists about whether Latinos are in fact a race or simply an ethnic group within which races exist. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, Critical Race scholarship remains a useful tool for understanding and elucidating the experiences of Latinos in education as a group that has been identified as nonwhite within the racially dichotomous society of North America. LatCrit theory is a useful analytical framework that builds on the strengths of CRT and expands its boundaries to consider the experience of an often-overlooked group in critical scholarship (Solorzano & Yosso 2002).

Stefanic (1997) additionally highlights the importance of the intersectionality that race, class, gender, language, immigration status and other factors in the experiences of Latinas/os and the “other” position that they occupy within the US society’s black/white binary. Latino Critical Theory and other sub-categories connected to CRT have grown out of these intersectional sites of subordination reified through structural and particularly legal aspects of US society. This intersectionality is appropriate for this work because of the participant group and their context. Latin American immigrants are a diverse group racially, socioeconomically, linguistically and along other lines of difference. As such,
CRT and LatCrit provide a theoretical perspective that accounts for this complexity of identity factors and examines their social positioning within the larger society. Similarly, the Canadian context and in particular urban Toronto consists of a diversity of racial, ethnic and cultural groups who interact with one another and the larger dominant culture in a variety of forms often mitigated by class, gender, immigration status and languages. Although, the concept of race is a challenging one to approach for the Latino community because of the diversity of origins that make up the Latino people (Hidalgo 1998), CRT is still a useful tool in work with Latinos in North America since they are positioned in society as a racialized “other” (Ladson-Billings 1998). Thus CRT and LatCrit can be useful tools for understanding the experiences of an ethnic minority group within complex Canadian society.

In recent years, scholars within the field of educational research such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, William Tate IV and Laurence Parker began to explore the use of CRT as a helpful lens through which to understand the inequity that exists within educational systems. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), in their pioneering work on CRT and education asserted that while race had been analyzed and theorized in other areas of scholarship that attempted to elucidate social inequity; the field of education had been obviously excluded from this exercise. Tate (1997) asserts that educational research often springs from an inferiority paradigm that informs educative law and policy. The inferiority of family structures, practices and experiences conforms part of this as diverse are often set up against White, middle class families. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) assert that only through focusing on the voice of people of color in education can an analysis of the educational system approaching completeness be achieved. They go on to state that without the voice of people of color, there is very little that can constructively be said about the education of children from communities of color. Thus by invoking CRT, educational researchers are able to challenge dominant paradigms within education and re-imagine changes to the long established inequities that exist in education.

CRT has also been explored for its methodological contributions to qualitative research in education. Parker (1998) poses the question in which scholars of qualitative research in education are interested a little differently: What can qualitative research do to illuminate
aspects of CRT? In other words, since qualitative research is such a rich field it can creatively provide a variety of ways to examine and challenges issues of race and inequity in education. The focus on intersectionality that exists within CRT connects well with the attention of the contextual and complex in qualitative research exemplified in the use of “rich description” in ethnographic methods for instance (Parker & Lynn 2002). CRT contributes to the further development of qualitative research in education as well. While for many years the experiences of students of color and their families have been ignored in qualitative research in education, CRT provides an avenue for these experiences to be centered. Applying a CRT lens to qualitative research focuses on how students, families and communities of color make sense of their reality within a racialized society, instead of resorting to deficiency theories, biological explanations or analysis of only class or gender (Parker & Lynn 2002). Finally, CRT and LatCrit offer qualitative research the possibility of connecting research to practice (Parker & Lynn 2002, Solorzano & Yosso 2002). CRT and LatCrit emphasize achieving racial equity as part of a larger social justice aim. Both promote activism on behalf of scholars in the field and the utilization of theory to understand current practices and actions to promote change. In their review of the 10 initial years elapsed since the first works of CRT in education emerged, Dixson and Rousseu (2006) observe that while CRT applied in legal studies has risen to the challenge of connecting theory to practice through activism for social justice, the same cannot be said of scholars employing CRT in educational research. This is a further challenge to scholars in the field and one which directly applies to this project.

2.3 Fit to Project

The topic of this study and its larger aim is well suited to the guiding principles of CRT and LatCrit. Similarly, the methodology of this proposed study, which will be detailed in a later portion, is also well suited to CRT and LatCrit. Both of these theoretical positions emphasize the utility and power of storytelling. Storytelling is a key aspect of scholarship in this vein as its adherents argue that the experiences of people of color can effect change in society as it is currently structured. Ladson-Billings (1995) notes that CRT’s use of storytelling to reveal hidden ideologies about race that produce inequity is considered rather unorthodox. In fact, it is often an aspect that is critiqued with the
argument that composite stories (often used in CRT scholarship) and other narrative forms take liberties with the truth and are difficult to evaluate because they lack intellectual rigor. Dixson and Rousseau (2006) outline this criticism and respond by referring to Ladson-Billings (2006) who asserts that stories should not be told for the sake of telling but rather because of what they provide to the research enterprise within the principles of CRT. What they provide is context (Ladson-Billings 1995). Rousseau and Dixson (2006) quoting Lawrence (1992) argue for the importance of context stating that “human problems considered and resolved in the absence of context are often misperceived, misinterpreted and mishandled” (p. 2281). Tate (1997) and Ladson-Billings (1995) in reviewing the foundational work of Richard Delgado clearly outlines 3 reasons why the narratives of people of color are particularly important:

1. Reality is socially constructed and as such stories have the power to create and reify our notions of reality and its components. CRT scholars advocate for the use of story as a valid approach through which to examine race and racism in law and society (Parker & Lynn 2002). The concept that is used to describe the use of story in CRT work is “voice”. Dixson & Rousseau (2006) describe voice as “the assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge” (p. 35). They go onto warn, however, that the term voice should not be understood as a singular voice that exists but rather as the shared experience of racism which is expressed through individual voices.

2. Stories serve to challenge existing narratives and build new narratives. CRT scholars note that there are dominant stories which are told and which serve to justify and reproduce existing relations of power. Stories from the margins can challenge these existing stories and provide avenues for new stories to be told (Dixson & Rousseau 2006, Tate 1997). In this sense the stories of people of color act as counterstories. The focus then is on the role that stories have within the dialectic of social realities. It is as Tate (1997) that the hearer and
story-teller together can build a world richer than either could make alone.

3. Stories have a community building and psychic self-preservation function. Stories not only challenge the dominant narratives but also strengthen the collective narratives that exist among people of color. Thus, stories are not only useful for the hearer who may be prompted to self-examination but also for the teller. Stories can serve as a tool for self-preservation in their ability to counteract deficit stereotypes that exist in dominant narratives and which are often internalized by people of colour.

Ladson-Billings (1995) makes the connection between the growing interest in narrative inquiry in the field of education and educational scholars interest in stories such as those employed in CRT. She warns readers, however, that the use of story is not equal. That is not all stories are judged as legitimate sources of knowledge. The stories of marginalized and oppressed people are usually nonexistent or discredited. CRT in opposition to this exclusion works to foreground these stories. Ladson-Billings asserts the need for the inclusion of stories of students and families of color in the education system if a complete analysis of the system is to be achieved and if scholars are to speak meaningfully about the education of minority children. Ladson-Billings (1995) also notes that early scholars in the tradition of CRT drew attention to their work because of their ability to relay compelling stories that have legal issues embedded within them. Dixson & Rousseau (2006) in their examination of the development of CRT in education scholarship, conclude that CRT has been applied to education mostly by the use of stories to examine and challenge racial inequities. However, they also challenge that “it is not enough simply to tell the stories of people of color” (p. 37). Instead, they advocate for a deeper analysis of these stories through the lens of CRT and an imperative to social activism as part of any CRT scholarship in education.

Though CRT and LatCrit theory are useful approaches, in their application to an urban Canadian context questions arise about their theoretical positioning. CRT theory is founded on the experiences of people of color within the Black/White binary in the
United States; in this context Latinos are the racialized other to both groups. Similarly, LatCrit theory finds its origins in the historical de-territorialization of Northern Mexico and the contemporary anti-Latino and anti-immigration sentiments in the US. The experiences of Latin Americans in Canada may not necessarily reflect the documented experiences or the theoretical understandings of Latin Americans in the US. Nevertheless, CRT and LatCRit provide a useful starting point from which to begin the exploration of what these experiences might be and how they might be understood. It is in this spirit that they will be employed within this study.

While CRT is grounded in the experiences of people of color in the United States it is a useful instrument for understanding race and its intersectionality with other oppressive structures within a Canadian context. Race relations in the United States have notoriety even outside of their own borders. It would be naïve to claim that the racial experiences of US people of color were identical to those in Canada. Canada prides itself on being a nation of diversity even while enacting policies and utilizing rhetoric that is exclusionary at best and racist at times. The Canadian experience of people of color cannot be sugarcoated; acts of systemic and individual racism occur widely and are often promulgated by structural forces. This is true even within the education system.

Canadian scholars who examine race in schooling (See Dei 1999, Razack 1998) provide strong arguments and abundant evidence of the relevance of developing a CRT framework within a Canadian context. Dei (1999) argues for the foregrounding of race and difference in discourses of education to effectively challenge the silencing of stories from the margins and unveil the processes and mechanisms of inequity that operate on the basis of identity markers such as race, class and gender. This is in stark opposition to the denial of difference which ignores the influence of race, class and gender on educational experiences. Applying a CRT lens to this work will contribute to the furthering of this framework in Canadian educational scholarship.

2.4 Social and Cultural Capital and Minority Parents

In this final section, I wish to discuss some useful analytical concepts that have been employed in previous scholarship on minority group parent involvement and their relevance to this project. Some useful tools for understanding the experience of minority
parents and students within schooling are Bourdieu’s notions of capital and field. The concepts of social and cultural capital, as developed by Bourdieu (1986) originate from his understanding that capital is the accumulation of labor. This capital which can be accumulated can then be reproduced and extended, but not everyone has access to the same capital within the social structure and the distribution of capital has tremendous influences on the configuration of the social structure. This conception of capital is extended beyond the economic capital, which evidently functions in this way, to cultural and social capital on which Bourdieu expands in his writing. He defines social capital as the social connections to which individuals have access—that is membership in a group that has value. Cultural capital is understood to have 3 forms: cultural knowledge, cultural goods and cultural accreditation (credentials).

Related to this concept of capital and its distribution is the Bourdieu’s complementary concept of field. Bourdieu’s concept of capital is limited without his accompanying idea about field as he posits that capital is exchanged and valued among actors within spaces which comprise the various areas of life which have their own guiding rules and principles which govern the actions within these fields (Wacquant 1998). To understand this concept of field especially as it relates to my work it is important to note two ways in which the field can be constructed. The first being as a “force field that imposes its specific determinations upon all those who enter it” (p. 221). That is to say the field acts to control and construct the actions of the actors within it as they attempt to acquire and implement the capital in whatever form that is valued within that field. As Wacquant (1998) states: “… a field structures action and representation from without: it offers the individual a gamut of possible stances and moves that she can adopt, each with its associated profits, costs and subsequent potentialities” (p. 222). At the same time the field can also be viewed as “an arena of struggle through which agents and institutions seek to preserve or overturn the existing distribution of capital… it is a battlefield wherein the bases of identity and hierarchy are endlessly disputed over” (p. 222). So while fields act to delimit the actions of actors within them in way that works to continue the existing distribution of capital simultaneously actors within the fields work to support or subvert the existing structure depending on their position within the field and also their desire to maintain or obtain position of privilege within the field “by pursuing strategies
of reconversion whereby they transmute or exchange one species of capital into another” (Wacquant 1998).

These notions of field and capital have been helpful tools in understanding schooling and are useful as implements to understand and explain the experiences of minority parent involvement in their children’s education. Bourdieu (1986) and scholars who have adopted his ideas assert that school is not a disinterested entity but rather a social agent that contributes to social reproduction (Gordon & Nocon 2008, Delgado-Gaitan 1991). What this means, is that schooling processes which would appear to be under the guise of providing an avenue for social mobility to all who pass through its doors in reality act to produce and reproduce the inequalities among groups that already exist in society. This is accomplished through the legitimization and validation of certain forms of cultural capital (knowledge and practices) and social capital (networks) that varies among within the field of schooling. De Gaetano (2007) asserts that “school is one of the primary institutions that socializes students into the dominant culture” (p. 148). Similarly, Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) assert that those already in possession of power use social institutions, including school and school curricula, to acquire consent and compliance with the ideologies of the dominant group. This limited capital provides limited access to resources and thus affects the experiences of these groups. As groups enact the capital they posses within specific fields they may either be working to reproduce the already existing structure which endows them with power and privilege or finding ways to challenge the existing structure. Wacquant (1998) describes this stating: “…position in the field inclines agents toward particular patterns of conduct: those who occupy the dominant position in fields tend to pursue strategies of conservation (of the existing distribution of capital) while those relegated to subordinate locations are more liable to deploy strategies of subversion”

In parent involvement, this plays out in the way that certain practices are ascribed value while others are not within the area of schooling. This positions certain parents and their children as insiders or marginal depending on the practices. Close sociological analysis reveals that there is a match of values between middle class families and schools (Delgado-Gaitan 1991, Delpit 1995, De Gaetano 2007). In effect parents of the dominant
class and culture enact capital that is within the field of schooling acts to reproduce the
distribution of capital in a way that favors them. Children of parents who are well versed
in the culture of school have a better chance of succeeding since their parents can act as
advocates and supporters during their schooling process (Delgado-Gaitan 1991).
Delgado-Gaitan (1991), in her work with Spanish-speaking parents in California,
concluded that many of the traditional avenues or parent involvement were not open to
minority parents because of the cultural knowledge that was required to effectuate these
practices. Even when minority parents hold currency in the cultural capital of schools,
their ability to successfully utilize social and cultural capital is dependent upon a
favorable institutional response (Gordon & Nocon 2008). In the case of parents who may
have had access to the valuable capital within schooling in their home country as they
transition to a new location and change their position within the social structure because
of changes in social and economic standing their access to this capital may diminish
significantly effecting their experience. Parents who may have previously been working
to reproduce the existing distribution of capital because of their position of privilege may
find themselves working to challenge the distribution they find in their home country, a
challenging feat. James (2008) furthers this idea in his work on immigrant parents’
effects. He writes:

Generally a “generation gap” exists between youth and their parents, and non-
immigrant parents are able to reference their own experiences growing up in the
society…to provide some measure of understanding…of the difference between
themselves and their children… Parents, then, could use their own experiences to
help them structure their communications with and expectations and aspirations for
their children…But for immigrant families/parents these family dynamics are
further mediated by a set of circumstances and factors related to the push and pull
face of immigration.

Immigrant parents find their efforts hindered because of their disparity in cultural and
social capital with the dominant culture and also with their children.

From a Critical Race Theory approach, Yosso (2006) asks the question: Are there forms
of cultural capital that marginalized peoples possess and which have been ignored in the interpretations of scholarship that works from Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital? She concludes that among communities of color there exist forms of cultural capital that she terms community cultural wealth. Community cultural wealth is “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression” (p.175). This re-imagined form of cultural capital takes many forms (aspirational, bi-linguistic, familial, social, navigational, resistant,) and is dynamic in that it builds and develops in a concentric fashion. Yosso’s (2006) approach responds to the challenge of developing new theories and frameworks to analyze the experiences of people of color that do not begin from a deficit perspective but that acknowledge the centricity of the experiences of people of color.

The value of recognizing the cultural capital that families of color bring has been documented by Trumbull et al. (2003) in their work on parent involvement which used the notion of cultural capital in teacher professional development. Through exposing teachers to the influences of cultural values in education and the notion of collectivist/individualistic values in families and schools, they witnessed remarkable changes and innovation in teacher’s practices and relationships with families. These changes included difference in time and scheduling of parent contact and even the structure of parent teacher conferences to match more harmoniously with collectivist values.

2.5 Power

As illustrated above, at the root of the analysis of parent involvement is the issue of power. Those who have the appropriate cultural knowledge to participate are vested with power within the system to make decisions and allocate resources that will serve their needs and interests. Conversely, those who do not hold this knowledge are left out of these decision-making and allocation processes (Delgado-Gaitan 1991). Lisa Delpit (1995) addresses the issue of power in schooling. She extensively discusses the implicit codes that exist within the structures and institutions of the dominant society and how knowledge of these codes provides access and power. Although, she focuses on the
experiences of students her argument can appropriately be extrapolated to the experiences of parents. Near the end of her text, she acknowledges that many of the parent education programs which attempt to teach parents neglect to understand why parents do what they do and what the greater significance is behind these behaviors. We need to be cautious, however, of attributing everything to culture. While it is an important part, the holistic experiences of families and students including the many aspects of their identity (not just cultural) need to be considered.

Cummins’ (1996) framework of coercive and collaborative relations of power manifested in macro- and micro- interactions is a useful analytical tool in understanding some of the inequity that continues to persist in school systems with diverse parents. This framework posits that the interactions between groups in larger society are often reflected in the interactions between representative members of these groups within schools (Cummins, 1996). This analysis is useful in understanding the interactions that occur between schools, teachers, students, parents and communities who represent different groups within various historical and actual power relations. Cummins (1996) proposes that the crucial aspect of schooling is human relationships and as such the interactions between the actors of schooling is vital and consequent to the whole sum of education. Through these interactions empowerment or disempowerment can occur. This depends largely on the nature of the relations that exist between groups. Empowerment occurs when collaborative relationships flourish through a vision of power being able to be generated and is produced through social relationships. Disempowerment, however, occurs when power is seen as a finite resource which is only gained through its taking from another. Relations between groups and individuals are based on power and can take either form. Within the space of schooling, there are several actors who are constantly (re)negotiating their identities in interaction with each other. These actors include students, parents, teachers and administrators. The power relations among these individuals most often reflect the relations of the groups these actors represent in larger society. Schofield (1996) comments on society’s categorization of immigrants as an example of the macro-relations between groups that ultimately effects how educators see families from these same groups and perpetuate the larger relationship.
Institutional structure is one of the key factors in the determination of power relations evident in micro-interactions. Educational structures are outlined by Cummins (1996) as “the organization of schooling in a broad sense that includes policies, programs, curriculum and assessment” (p. 18). Institutional structure ultimately shapes the other key dimension of power relation determination: role definition. Role definitions are described by Cummins (1996) as “the mindset of expectations, assumptions and goals that educators bring to the task of education culturally diverse students” (p. 18). These self-definitions do not only constitute the way that educators see themselves but also the way in which they see the individuals (particularly parents) that belong to other cultures or hold different values (Cummins, 1996). The role definitions and educational structure both work to determine the micro-interactions and are ultimately influenced by the macro-interactions among groups in society.

Fine (1993) also discusses issues of power in her examination of parent involvement initiatives in three large American cities. She notes that parents enter the arena of public education often divested of power and resources. She notes that although they are invited in by the recent attention to parent involvement, questions of power and authority are not addressed and parents are expected to simply acquiesce to the larger educational project which may include blaming them for the challenges their children face while also asking them to rebuild a broken system. She questions the discourse of parent involvement as the all-curing panacea particularly for ethnic minority and working class students within a system that continues to exclude and alienate the same parents it is calling on to be involved. She argues that unless these issues of power are addressed the calls for parent involvement in the name of reform will prove fruitless. She calls for radical restructuring of schools and communities that nurture democracy and difference and that involve all stakeholders in education, not exclusively parents.

In the following section, I will review some of the literature that exists on the topic of study focusing particularly on those pieces that employ the theoretical ideas discussed in this section.
Chapter 3
Review of Relevant Literature

In this chapter, I will outline the different conceptions of parent involvement that emerge in the literature and the relevance of home-school relationships. Following that I will review the scholarly work that focuses on minority families and particularly Latin American families. Finally, I will discuss some useful theoretical concepts that appear in the literature on this topic and which I will employ in this research to illuminate parent involvement among Latin American parents and the divergent conceptions that exist on this subject.

3.1 Parent Involvement: Definitions and Practices

The importance of parent involvement is evident in the growing attention it is receiving in research, policy and practice. Fine (1993) makes the connection between the current era of school reform and parent involvement noting that it is quickly becoming reform movements’ “vanguard” (p. 682). Parent involvement is a complex term with a wide array of definitions and understandings around what it means in a conceptual and an embodied form. These many definitions originate from different actors within the educational system and serve different purposes.

Joyce Epstein has emerged as a salient voice in the discussion on parent involvement. Epstein (1995, 2001) has developed a conceptual theory of parent involvement that asserts that school, home and community all exert influence on students’ lives. From this theory, Epstein (1995, 2001) has developed a framework of 6 categories of parental involvement. They are articulated as ways that schools can partner with parents in practices of involvement.

- Parenting: helping families establish home environments that support children as students.
- Communication: school-home and home-school communication about school programs and children’s progress.
- Volunteering: recruiting and organizing parent help and support.
• Learning at home: providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decision and planning.
• Decision-making: including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.
• Collaborating with community: identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practice and student learning and development.

This typology has been employed widely in research on teachers’ practices and perspectives of parent involvement (Peterson 2007; Ramirez 2000; Tichenor 1998; Ramirez 1997; Epstein & Dauber 1991; Epstein & Becker 1982; Becker & Epstein 1982). This typology is also prevalent in teacher education as Epstein developed a textbook based on her theory and thus it has shaped the way that pre-service teachers conceptualize parent involvement prior to entering the classroom and later employ it as they engage in practices of parent involvement as in-service teachers.

While Epstein’s typology of parent involvement is extensive and includes a broad range of activities, the conception of parent involvement is one that is school-centric (Lawson 2003). Many of the activities of parent involvement are contained within the school and/or structured by the school to meet its demands. Lawson (2003) divides the activities into two camps: school based and home based. He infers this distinction from his interviews with community members and teachers in a low-income, urban, mostly Black community. It should be noted that activities that take place within the home are still school-centric in their focus as they are often concerned with reinforcing concepts, social practices and values important in school and thus facilitating the behaviour management aspect of teachers’ work. These home-based school centric practices can take many forms but all of them have parents serving the needs of the school as defined by teachers. This traditional view of parent involvement is bounded within the school as a site, focuses on serving the agenda set out by the school and constructs teachers and parents in a hierarchical relationship (Waggoner & Griffith 1998; Souto-Manning & Swick 2006). Furthermore, the traditional conception of parent involvement has largely influenced
policy and practice around parent involvement. Cutler (2000) notes that Epstein’s familiar and influential conception of parent involvement while building partnerships between home and school concurrently work to position the school as “first among equals” (p. 202) within that partnership. Wolfendale (2002) adds to this, noting that for a long time parent participation in education has been on educators’ terms.

De Gaetano (2007) provides another clear division between parent involvement conceptions. He makes the distinction between formal and informal practices of parent involvement. Formal practices are those that are commonly enacted during structured home-school communication. Examples of these practices include but are not limited to: volunteers in the classroom; parent-teacher conferences; communication sent home and homework requiring parental assistance. Informal practices include providing quiet homework space in the home, assisting with homework, discussing school or other events/experiences and consciously using teaching strategies during shared activities. De Gaetano (2007) notes that often formal approaches are regarded as being the most effective and ethnic minority parents are pegged as rarely engaging in them leading educators to conclude that they are “uninvolved” and “uncaring” about their children’s education.

In her study of parent involvement and empowerment in Carpinteria, California, Delgado-Gaitan (1991) outlines 2 types of parent involvement activities that emerge: conventional and non-conventional The conventional activities reflected the dominance of the school district on families as they required parents to engage in activities that presumed certain cultural knowledge. Non-conventional activities saw parents participate in children’s schooling in ways that acknowledged their cultural understandings and built on these as they provided avenues for parents to have a voice in their children’s education. She contrasts both of these categories with the activities of the Comité de Padres Latinos (Committee of Latino Parents) or COPLA, a group of parents who empowered by the non-conventional practices initiated their own collective. These parents developed their own purpose and direction for activities and invited representatives from the school to share in decision-making. This included parents
seeking and sharing information with one another and employing this information to advocate for a better educational experience for their children together.

What is crucial to note in all the diverse conceptions of parent involvement is that not all expressions of parent involvement are valued equally within educational systems. Certain practices of parent involvement are ascribed legitimacy and value while others are ignored completely or their benefits considered negligible. For the most part, the kind of parent involvement that is welcomed are those considered white middle class actions of parent involvement (Zuniga-Dunlap 1997; Baker 1997; Joshi et al. 2005; Moosa et al. 2001; De Planty 2007). This involves activities located within the school and supporting the school’s already pre-determined agenda such as volunteering in the classroom and participating in parent-teacher interviews. The kind of practices that are welcomed also depends on the ways in which activities are carried out. For example, parent-teacher communication must adhere to the codes of speech between the two parties and align with the cultural practices of the dominant culture. Moosa et al. (2001) in their work on Arab parent involvement found that teachers’ cultural knowledge of parents and their communication styles was limited. They recommended that schools broaden the range of activities to incorporate more diverse styles of interaction rather than assume parents disinterest in participating.

Normalized practices of parent involvement are expected from all parents. However, many scholars have noted that ethnic minority and working class parents are less likely to engage in these kind of parent involvement practices (Chavkin & Williams 1993, Souto-Manning and Swick 2006, Moles 2003). Where does it leave these parents?

3.2 The “Other” Parents: Parent Involvement and Minority Group Parents

The differences in understanding parent involvement for minority parents begins at the level of terminology. Current conceptions of parent involvement include only primary caregivers (Lopez 2001). In many minority families, however, members of multiple generations and related by different avenues are included; this is certainly the case for Latino families (Hidalgo 1998). Thus parent involvement as it is currently conceptualized
leaves these members of the family excluded although in reality they might serve as beneficial resources for students. This is particularly true for immigrant families who may live in inter-generational homes influenced by family reunification policies or chain immigration practices. That parent involvement is only limited to one type of family is an example of what Heilman (2008) terms “family hegemony” (p. 9)- “the cultural power of the “ideal” family construct” (p. 10).

Unfortunately, ethnic minority parent or parents of lower socioeconomic status have been pegged by teachers and others as uninterested in their children’s schooling and unwilling to be involved in schools because of often low levels of contact (Moles 1993). However, a number of scholars (Lareau 2000, Moles 2003, Chavkin & Williams 2003) conclude that low levels of parent involvement cannot be blamed on disinterest on the part of parents alone. The issue is a complex one.

Moles (1993) identifies three potential obstacles to parent involvement among disadvantaged parents that signal that intersecting nature of parent involvement and its complexity:

1. Limited skills and knowledge of educators and parents in creating and maintaining collaborative interactions.
2. Restricted opportunities for interaction due to other demands on time and resources for both parents and educators
3. Psychological and cultural barriers such as misperceptions and misunderstandings based on previous negative experiences or differences in cultural practices.

It is important to note that Moles (1993) defines disadvantaged parents as all those “who experience social or economic limitations to full participation in…society” (p.21). He includes race, ethnicity, class, language and other factors among the factors that act to limit involvement in the larger society.

Not all parent involvement is considered equal. Neither are all parents. A hierarchy of parents and practices develops where some are held in higher esteem than others based on the perceived quality of contact in involvement (Huss-Keeler 1997; Lawson 2003; Ramirez 2000). Parents who do not occupy the highest positions on this hierarchy are not
further encouraged to participate more but rather constructed as uninterested and essentially abandoned.

Nakagawa (2000) examines the official discourse of parent involvement in order to uncover how parents are constructed within it and particularly how it empowers some but not others. Working from the same premise as Lubeck and Devries (2000) who outline that discourse is constitutive, she finds that some parents are valued for their involvement while others are blamed for their lack of perceived involvement. She describes this as the double bind that is set-up of parents as protector and parents as problem. As protectors, parents are constructed as ideal figures who are valued as resources that often compensate for the lack of resources in other areas. For instance, parents who organize to fundraise for equipment or extra-curricular activities. The protector construct is viewed as the ideal. Parents are measured against the ideal and therefore are seen as problems. As problems, parents are constructed as failing the school system and their children by not being involved in “protective” ways. They are burdened with the demands of the schools’ prescriptive form of parent involvement and when they do not meet the expectations they are treated as deficient. This construction of parents limits the power that they have as a group and restricts their actions to those that are in the interest of the school and not necessarily their children.

Lightfoot (2004) further examines the discourse on parent involvement and how it represents certain parents, particularly those who are located in urban environments and are of diverse racial, class and cultural backgrounds. Like Nagawaka (2000), she finds that parent involvement constructs a dichotomy of parents and divides rather than unites. The dichotomy she identifies is that of full/empty or lacking/having. While some parents are viewed as having the resources and energy to be involved others are seen as needing to be filled before they can contribute anything. This is particularly evident in parent education programs that seek to teach parents rather than to collaborate with them. Lightfoot (2004) found that even in these programs where equity and social justice undergirded the mandate of the program there was still a strong tendency to align with the official discourse on parent involvement in the language that was used in organizational documents. This discourse ultimately constrained who was involved as
well as how this involvement played out and kept decisions out of the control of parents. Lightfoot (2004) mentions that it is difficult to view parents as having something valuable to offer when the discourse of parent involvement is premised on the notion of parents as lacking and empty.

Even when minority parents engage in activities that would appear to be those of the dominant culture and class, the benefits are often misplaced and the value of these practices misconstrued. Gordon & Nocon (2008) found that Latino parents from an inner-city neighborhood who were participating in a bussing program to a high performing school in a suburban neighborhood were exercising their agency and advocating for their children. These parents demanded that their children be removed from low-standards bilingual classrooms and integrated into mainstream English classes; something to which the middle class, white dominated school council was opposed. Their actions clearly demonstrated the exertion of their voice in the education of their children and a desire to improve their children’s education in practical and meaningful ways. At the same time, this was contradictory as it led to the elimination of bilingual teachers and support staff at the school who acted as cultural brokers for parents. Their absence signaled a decreased level of support for Latino families and affected the communication between parents and the school. Gordon and Nocon (2008) concluded that both white middle class and lower class Latino parents wanted the same thing for their children. They wanted them to be placed in classes with high performing middle class students. Thus, they wanted the best for their children and this conception of the best was shared among groups: a middle class, English speaking student body whose teachers had high expectations. This directly challenges the misconception that minority parents do not care or are disengaged from scholastic functions. Each group of parents attempted to achieve this in very different ways and with differing results but both had the aim of associating with the higher status group (white, middle class, English speaking). Latino Parents wanted to build ties with white middle class families which could have led to new social circles that might provide new and useful information. They accomplished this through advocating for the collapsing of the bilingual education program- which parents observed had low expectations and created challenges for students when they entered the mainstream classes- and instead having them streamed into the English speaking stream. The white
middle class families did not want to build ties with the lower class Latinos but rather create an exclusive group separate from them. They accomplished this by advocating for improvements in programming for gifted students which had students separated out often leaving newly streamed-in Latino students out. Gordon and Nocon (2008) conclude that much of the participation by low-income minority parents was mediated by school professionals in response to state mandated calls for parent involvement. Ultimately this participation serves the priorities of the school which in the end aligned with those of the dominant privileged classes.

Fullan (1982) carries the concept further by arguing that communities can and do want to challenge and change policies and practices within schools that are ill-fitting and ill-conceived. However, the challenge presents itself in that the confidence, insight and power to do this are not evenly distributed. Minority parents want the same thing for their children that parents of more privileged classes want, however their access to the ways and means of making this happen are limited thereby preventing this from happening. James (2008) in examining the educational aspirations of immigrant parents for their children argues that parents’ potentially positive influence of high expectations for their children and a desire to see them advance are often thwarted by the cultural and generational gap that exists for immigrant families and the often racializing schooling experience of immigrant children and parents. Parent’s high expectations for their children their trust in the school system concludes in disappointment when students from these immigrant communities don’t succeed and are also alienated from their culture and family. The combination of these challenges is often insurmountable for minority parents and students.

These pieces all highlight the often conflicting and contradictory expectations that exist for minority parents to be involved only within the accepted constructs that schools delineate for them. They also emphasize the sense of exclusion and silencing that parents experience in their interactions with educational structures. It should be noted that not all minority parents assume the same attitudes or engage in the same practices related to parent involvement (Ritter, Mont-Reynaud & Dornbusch 2003). Even among one particular minority group attitudes and practices may differ based on the experiences of
those particular groups/individuals. Gordon & Nocon (2008) warn that when parents are treated as a monolithic entity through the policies and practices of educational systems, rather than school improvement-segregation and social exclusion is created. They call for “a more comprehensive understanding of inequalities in social and cultural capital among parents and the role of schools in the reproduction of advantage” (p. 337).

Since minority parent involvement is generally viewed as a problem to be solved through its increase, there are many avenues for interventions available in the literature. Some avenues for its development include: parent involvement as a topic of discussion and focus in teacher education (Moles 1993, Chavkin & Williams 1993, De Gaetano 2007); changes in the educational system as a whole (Moles 1993); time release or credit for teacher initiatives that promote parent involvement (Moles 1993); parent education and training programs (Aspiazu et al. 1998, Sampson 2007, Brilliant 2001, Chrispeels & Rivero 2001, Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis 2005) and professional development for educators regarding collaborating with minority families (Trumbull et al. 2003, De Gaetano 2007).

3.3 Latino Parent Involvement: Another Vision

This work builds on the scholarship of those who have challenged the limited definition that is often ascribed to “parent involvement” and particularly minority parent involvement. Trumbull et al. (2003) note that cultural differences among parents are rarely considered and when they are it is to the end of signaling deficiency in minority parents. However, in recent scholarship on parent involvement (particularly Latino parent involvement) there has been a move to explore practices of minority parents that support children’s education which might have been ignored previously.

Like other minority parents, Latino parents have their actions often misconstrued by educators as being disinterested and disengaged from their children’s education. However, a number of scholars have shown that in studies on Latino families, parents show a keen interest in being involved and included as part of their children’s education (Trumbull et al. 2003, Delgado-Gaitan 1992, Valencia & Black 2007, McClelland & Chen 1996). Furthermore, a number of notable works have explored the practices of
Latino families and illuminated how these practices serve to support the education of children.

Delgado-Gaitan (1992) in her study of parent involvement in a Mexican American home identified several practices that were enacted. These practices included: the provision of physical and social resources that supported children’s education; the provision of emotional and motivational resources through the sharing of experiences and cultivating strong relationships and numerous and educational interpersonal interactions. Although these practices supported the education of their children, none of these parents were engaged in what might be conventional practices of parent involvement leaving room for them to be pegged as “uninvolved”. Her analysis also notes that parents were confident in their role of providing material and emotional resources for their children but less so in providing academic support. This uncertainty was mitigated however, when they received assistance and guidance from caring educators or were directed to other resources that could be of assistance. She concludes that the home-learning environment is dependent on the quality of the relationship between home and other institutions such as school, church and others and in how these support the work of parents. Echoing Portes and Rumbaut (2006) she works from the idea that children are socialized in the form that is fitting to their social surroundings; this may be different from the values and practices of the dominant culture for minority children. This means that immigrant families need to be supported in raising bicultural children within a racialized environment.

Lopez (2001) has also documented the practices of an immigrant family in encouraging their children to pursue educational aspirations. Through exposing the children to the parents’ occupations of agricultural labor, the Padilla family were involved in motivating their children to succeed in school in order to avoid having to work in low-paying, physically strenuous work to which their parents were relegated. The cultural practice of exposing children to work and teaching them the value of hard work and education are conceptualized as practices of parent involvement in this case.

Espinoza-Herold (2007) examined the cultural resource of dichos (sayings, altruisms) in the process of a mother supporting her daughter’s educational trajectory. These dichos
worked to create a discursive space where mother and daughter could share and explore the triumphs and challenges of negotiating life as members of a minority group in a bicultural environment. This space ultimately served to support the daughter’s motivation and achievement in educational endeavors despite challenges such as an early school leaving situation; truancy; the threat of early pregnancy and other poor life choices. Her work also highlights the cultural resource of *familismo*. In this case study, the whole family made sacrifices and adjustments that contributed to facilitating one member’s (Carla) schooling experiences. This included parents and siblings as well as extended family members who made accommodations. The concept of *familismo* is one which has been noted as a central aspect of the Latino family (Hidalgo 1998). It is important to note that both the *dichos* and the enactment of *familismo* are elements of the Latino culture which were deployed in this case to enable the educational achievement and holistic development of Carla.

Menard-Warwick (2007) makes the point that although these studies all contribute to furthering the understanding of practices within Latino families in some ways they essentialize the Latino family and its practices by not looking at differences that might exist within the heterogeneous group of Latino immigrants. Menard-Warwick (2007) accomplishes this in her work which compares the parent involvement and literacy practices of two sisters-in-law residing in the same household. Menard-Warwick’s (20078) work is also valuable as it heeds Hidalgo’s (1998) call for a consideration of the sociohistorical experiences of the diverse elements of the Latino immigrant community within a Latino family research paradigm.

Although the above studies are particularly salient in this body of literature, they only represent a small selection of the work that focuses on Latin American parents’ involvement in their children’s education and the new understandings about parent involvement and the education of minority children that this discussion elucidates. All of these works challenge the assumption that Latin American parents are disinterested and disengaged from their children’s education. Instead, what is evident is that the practices that Latin American parents engage in work to support their children’s educational experience and achievement. Parents draw on their personal, familial and cultural
resources to support children in schooling. Latino parents are concerned with education, but embody this concern in ways that are distinct from the modes of the dominant culture which is expected and valued by the school. The difference in cultural values of education is evident even in the terminology. The Spanish word *educación* which might literally translate to the word education in English holds within it so much more than just the achievement of academic credentials. For a person to be *educada/educado* (educated) includes academic learning as well as manners and moral values (Valdes, 1996). This more holistic and encompassing understanding of education (Villenas & Deyhle 1999) certainly infiltrates all areas of life related to education in the Latin American home, including parent involvement. Finally, all of these studies make a call for inclusion of new conceptions of parent involvement into the discourse of the relationship between families and schools. If schools are indeed interested in meeting the needs of diverse students, they will be required to take into account the practices of parent involvement that contribute to minority children’s education and ascribe legitimacy and value to these practices as well as find avenues for them to be strengthened and improved.

### 3.4 Canadian Context

Ladky and Stagg Peterson (2008) have explored the perspectives of parents, educators and administrators regarding immigrant parent involvements within a Canadian context and particularly in Ontario. Parents in this study reported that they perceived their participation in schools as a conduit to improving their English skills and becoming more familiar with the cultural codes of the host country. This involvement then serves the purpose of contributing to the settlement of these families and goes beyond the academic achievement and schooling of the child. This is a broader perspective on parent involvement which pushes the boundaries of the conventional definition of parent involvement. The educators and administrators in the study did not necessarily share this perspective on parent involvement and its ends. Parents also shared that for children who had been in private schools in their home country parent involvement was a common practice. This highlights the influences that socioeconomic status might have on the educational experiences of immigrant families both before and after immigration (Portes & Rumbaut 2006). Parents also shared uncertainties about their English abilities during
parent-teacher interviews. Many doubted that the short interviews sporadically throughout the year were sufficient for communication about their child’s progress. Instead, parents showed a clear preference for more frequent and informal avenues of contact with the school and its personnel. Teacher and administrators also noted low responses particularly by immigrant parents for formal participation practices such as school council meetings.

While Latin Americans are a numerous and notable minority group in the United States in Canada they are overshadowed by larger immigrant populations such as those from South and East Asia (Statistics Canada 2006). Nevertheless, they are a growing community and there exists some initial scholarly work on the educational experiences in Canada. This work focuses largely on the agency of Latin American families in response to cultural pressures from institutions such as schools (Bernhard & Freire 1999; Bernard, Freire & Pacini-Ketchabaw 1998; Bernard, Freire, Torres & Nardosh 1998). These works which were part of a larger ethnographic study on Latin American experiences of education in Canada share some of the findings of the work that has already been done in the United States. Among these findings are the existence of institutional barriers that limit parent involvement; the perpetuation of misunderstandings that occur as a result of limited and ineffective communication between home and school; the recognition of cultural differences between home and school and the importance of bilingualism and biculturalism for Latino families. It is interesting to note that while the Latin American experience in Canada is very distinct, many of the same analytical tools and concepts drawn from the United States experiences can be employed to illuminate the processes at work in Canadian society.
Chapter 4
Methodology

For this project, I employed a topical life history approach. Life history is an approach that lies within the purview of narrative inquiry which forms part of the larger collection of qualitative research methods. In this section, I will begin by discussing the significant elements of qualitative research. I will then discuss the life history approach addressing the different stages of the research process, my rationale for using this approach and some of the challenges that it presents to conclude with a description of my empirical study.

4.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research involves a broad and diverse collection of instruments, approaches and styles that cross numerous disciplines (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Qualitative research is premised on interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). That is to say, information within a given context is gathered by the qualitative researcher and transformed through the lens of the researcher and analytic and theoretical tools into a representation of the original. This takes us to the essence of qualitative research which its affirmation of constructedness. Merriam (1998) discusses qualitative research’s ontological foundation of reality as “constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p.6); its interest in “understanding the meaning people have constructed” (p. 6) and this growing understanding being an end in itself and coming about through inductive study presented in a “richly descriptive” (p.10) end product. The ontology of qualitative research is also based in the researcher’s biography and the lived experience that have shaped her/his understanding of reality. This in turn influences the questions that are pursued as a research act (epistemology) and the methodology that is employed to best address those questions. In any empirical study, these three aspects of the research work, ontology; epistemology and methodology, are couched embedded within a paradigm which serves as the interpretive lens through which the researcher observes, understands and draws meaning from the world (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Qualitative research is characterized
by a richness that draws on the diversity of tools available and the subjectivity of the researcher’s participation in the research act.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) in their foundational text on qualitative research refer to qualitative inquiry as bricolage. This is in reference to the view of the qualitative researcher as bricoleur from the French handyman/handywoman. As a bricolage, qualitative research is composed of a number of pieces that are crafted together at the hands of the bricoleur who employs a wide range of tools in construction. The bricolage then is “a pieced together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p. 4). The concept of the bricolage also refers to the interdisciplinary nature of research work in the present moment (Kincheloe 2001). This concept is fitting as the project considered here will benefit from the influence of and access to the instruments of a number of disciplines such as sociology, curriculum studies and family studies.

Another key element of qualitative research is its emphasis on the naturalistic perspective (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). This means there is a focus on the everyday, everyperson experience to understand complex realities. It also requires an anthropological mindset that views the reality as complex and contingent and more likely to be understood through depth than breadth. This is best exemplified by contrasting quantitative inquiry’s tendency to draw conclusions from numerous, random samples versus qualitative inquiry’s approach of analyzing rich, voluminous data on a single subject (Denzin & Lincoln 2005).

Because of the diverse methods and interpretative paradigms that are available to the qualitative researcher and the understanding that the richness of qualitative research comes from the interaction of these many tools into the finished product, qualitative research often employs more than one approach to data collection and draws on a variety of interpretive frameworks for analysis and representation. That is certainly the case with my proposed study.

For this project, I positioned myself within the critical paradigms of Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Theory. Each of these contributed to the shaping of the research as it
was conducted and presented. The above discussion clearly highlights the role of a critical perspective in qualitative research. The forthright acknowledgement of the constructed nature of subjective reality and thus research and the researcher’s operative role in this construction qualifies the process, the relationships and the finished product of the empirical study. Drawing on critical theory, I aim to make this research part of the “first step toward forms of political actions that can redress the injustices found in the field site or construction in the very act of research itself” (Kincheloe & McLaren 2001). From the methodologies of Qualitative Research, I will use the life history approach in my empirical study.

4.2 Life History

Life history is used to describe an extensive biographical narrative that can be presented in oral or written form. However, it can also describe a social science text that represents an autobiographical narrative as narrated by the subject. Others still use life history to mean a narrative about one particular aspect of a person’s life; an epiphanal event or a turning point (Chase 2005, Cole & Knowles 2001, Atkinson 2001). Another type of personal narrative that may also span the events of a lifetime or of a particular moment or topic is the testimonio, from the Spanish testimony. This subtype of life history has a strong political current and aims to describe and resist oppression (Chase 2005). This virtual menu of versions of life history, however, share foundational understandings of reality, knowledge and research while contending with similar challenges in the investigative task.

Contemporary modes of life history can be traced back to the work of Chicago School sociologists who gathered life stories and other personal artifacts beginning in the 1920s and 1930s (Chase 2005, Goodson & Sykes 2001). The earliest example of a research text in this vein is Thomas and Znaniecki’s The Polish Peasant which documented the life history of a Polish immigrant, Wladek Wiszniewski. This early predecessor was particularly notable because of the way in which it utilized Wisniewski’s story to represent the social realities of an immigrant from Poland to the United States during that period of history (Chase 2005, Goodson &Sykes 2001). The authors of this text believed strongly that life history records were the most valuable of sociological data because they
connected the social context and its realities to the subjective experience of those who embodied that context and reality. Chase (2005) quotes Thomas and Znaniecki’s rationale for the use of life histories:

A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study if its formal organization, but analyze the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence which is has upon their lives (p.653).

Subsequent to Wiszniewski’s story, Chicago school researchers continued to engage in other studies employing life history including juvenile delinquents and criminals. Under the cultivation of scholars at the Chicago School and others life history research continued. The culture of research of the period emphasized abstract theory, survey and statistical methods and positivist analyses, thus life history was marginal to this mainstream movement (Chase 2005) Goodson & Sykes (2001) refer to life history as a major battleground in sociology. Other disciplines such as anthropology, also made fruitful use of life history. Initially, life history served the anthropological task of understanding cultures; later, however, they were used to illuminate cultural change that arrived through contact among cultures (Chase 2005).

After its initial growth, another historical moment for life history work emerged along with the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although there had been some life histories which portrayed the subjective experiences of women, feminist critique indicated that the majority of work promoted androcentric notions of the male experience as the norm. Similarly, the civil rights movement burgeoned and facilitated the development of work with slave narratives (Chase 2005). This resulted in the inclusion of previously silenced voices of marginalized peoples in the narratives of life history research.

The contribution of feminist researchers to the field of life history has been particularly valuable. It was through their work that questions about the relationships within the research task were brought to the forefront. Feminist scholars critiqued the utilitarian approach to life history that employed narratives to position research participants as
“other.” They began to emphasize the importance of personal narratives that positioned individuals as social actors with the sovereignty to assign meaning to the experiences and situations of their lives; meanings that allowed for innovative understandings of reality (Chase 2005). This lead to questioning the other subjective positions within the research task including that of the researcher and the meaning making that was couched in her/his lived experience. With the influence of postmodernism, issues of “voice, authenticity, interpretive authority and representation” (p. 655) were also brought into the dialogue (Chase 2005). This molding of the ontology and epistemology of life history through a feminist lens has been invaluable to its development as a methodological tool and its continued relevance within the current research context.

As other methodological instruments within qualitative inquiry, life history is constructivist and naturalist in its emphases. Life history approaches are greatly concerned with relations: this includes the relationships that exist within the research process and amongst individuals and their social contexts (Cole & Knowles 2001). The essence of life history is the intersection between “human experience and social context” (Cole & Knowles, p. 9) and historical processes (Candida Smith 2003) to create the possibility of understanding. Addressing the relations to social contexts and identities is a key part of the researcher’s work (Denzin 1978). Life history aims to grasp at knowledge of the human condition through learning about other humans’ experiences. This includes “understanding a situation, profession, condition or institution” (Cole & Knowles 2001, p. 11) through the lived experience of the individuals therein.

How the participant defines her/his experience is of utmost importance in the life history approach (Denzin 1978). Although the focus is usually on one person or a select small group, the in-depth documenting and analysis of these smaller units provides an avenue for understanding about the collective to which they might belong (Cole & Knowles 2001). It needs to be noted that understanding of the collective is not expansive but rather grows through the pieces which an in-depth life history inquiry provides. One life history does not speak to the whole experience of any group, but rather contributes to the deepening of knowledge of one aspect of their experience.
Life history places great emphasis on stories. Atkinson (2001) concludes that these stories serve 4 key functions. First, they help us to view lives subjectively and objectively through various stages thus contributing to the formation of identity. Second, they validate social experiences which elucidates the relationships that exist in a given context. Thirdly, stories communicate the ecological perspective of an individual or what might be called a worldview. Finally, they serve a mystical or religious function as they inspire both awe and wonder and can allow both teller and listener to transcend into the realm of the spiritual. Thus the value of life histories are both for the research apparatus as well as the research participants since through the stories the order, value and meaning of life are prized while also leaving a textual legacy for the future (Atkinson 2001).

Another key aspect of life history and its approach to knowledge is its emphasis on the agency of the voiceless. Candida Smith (2003) points out that discrepancies that exist between subjective narrations and what may be the official, objective texts on a contextual experience. Atkinson (2001) also asserts that telling stories enables us to be heard, recognized and acknowledged by others. Goodson & Sykes (2001) assert that “life history data disrupts the normal assumptions of what is ‘known’ by intellectuals in general and sociologists in particular” (p. 7). Besides the research community Goodson & Sykes (2001) observe that life history promotes that “power should listen to the people it claims to serve” ((p.8.). This is particularly relevant for life history research that focuses on those individuals and communities that might exist in a marginal space vis-à-vis dominant groups within a social context.

4.3 My Empirical Study: Rationale

The rationale for employing this methodology in the context of this particular study was twofold both scholarly and personal. I hoped to build on the work of other Latina scholars such as Valenzuela (1999) and Villenas (2005) who advocate for the use of a historical narrative approach to qualitative research with Latinas/os. They also assert that this approach makes the research accessible and relevant to the community it intends to serve and is reflective of the cultural practices and values.
Life history research challenges the myth of the objective researcher. This aspect of the methodology is particularly relevant for this study since my own experiences growing up in a Latino-Canadian immigrant home and being schooled in the Canadian education system will color my understanding of the participants life histories and will ultimately reflect some of my own life history. As Denzin (2004) states, “The other who is presented in the text is always a version of the researcher’s self“ (p. 452).

The connection between family life and life history was another reason for my selection of this methodology in this project. Anderson (1985) outlines what he deems to be the ultimate tasks of parenting: “to recognize and affirm the humanity of the child and…to create and sustain the personal life of the child” (p. 70). The first deals with the important role that family plays in the development of personhood. The second goes beyond the protection of merely physical, creaturely life and its sustenance. Instead it points to the sustenance of that life which is contextualized within the relationships and environments that surround the child. This can be understood as the development of the child’s sense of belonging to a history of the self as she/he moves through the many stages of life. Thus, Anderson (1985) concludes that the task of parenting should result in a life history being able to be told. This connection between the narrating of story and family resonates with my own understanding of the role of the family in society and in the development of self. In regards to ethnic minority families, working class families or immigrant families, their stories are often punctuated with experiences of loss and hardship accompanied by resilience and struggle. These stories are often not validated within the larger context of the dominant culture. This is enacted through the devaluation of ethnic families and their practices and their identification as problematic and negative in contrast to the legitimized stories of white, middle class families. This work is focused on the stories of those marginalized families in an effort to offer new perspectives on these families, their practices and their positions within the larger social context with a particular focus on their involvement in their children’s educational life and the institutions of schooling.

On a more personal note, my training in Literature at the undergraduate level was rooted in a deep love of stories and their functions in society. Although the rigors of reading and
essay writing to meet course requirements soured my relationship with stories (at least in
the form of voluminous novels) near the end of my undergraduate degree, my affinity for
oral story telling (fictional, factual, my own or others) did not desist. Those close to me
will vigorously affirm that I converse in stories (often with embellishment for dramatic
effect). I am confident that the way I understand the social world around is through the
stories that weave my life and the lives of those close to me together with the
circumstances around us. Thus, the employment of life history as the method for my
Master’s thesis seemed a fitting choice.

4.4 Recruitment and Sampling

Life history documents the stories of individuals and it is in large part the researcher’s
decision as to who is selected. For this project I collected the life histories of 3 Latin
American family units. This included both parents and children and did not encompass
family members living outside of the household unit. I contacted potential participants
through key contacts in social service agencies that serve members of the Latin American
community in Toronto as well as through events within the Latin American community
in Toronto. The agencies were:

1. Centre for Information and Community Services of Ontario which has Settlement
Workers who connect with families in schools. At the time of this project, they
employed one Spanish-speaking settlement worker who served Spanish-speaking
families in the East of Toronto. This is not an agency serving Latin Americans
exclusively, but the particular settlement worker works exclusively with Latin
Americans in an area of Toronto which has a moderately high concentration of
Latin Americans (City of Toronto 2008)

2. The Spot is the youth program of the Jane-Finch Community Family Centre. They
currently employ an Immigrant Settlement Adaptation Program worker who is
Spanish-speaking. The area of Toronto known as the Jane-Finch corridor or more
recently University Heights also has a high-density Latin American population
(City of Toronto 2008).
3. The Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples provides a broad range of community and settlement services all over the city of Toronto to people from a number of Spanish-speaking countries.

Through the key contacts at these different agencies, I distributed an invitation flyer to participate in the study. These invitations were posted in the locations of the agencies with high client traffic. In the first two agencies, the settlement workers agreed to distribute invitations to families that they served and that they believed would be particularly interested and might benefit from participating. One of the participant families contacted me in July of 2009 as a result of receiving an invitation flyer through a settlement worker.

The second family was recruited at a networking event for Ecuadorian professionals hosted by the Ecuadorian consulate. I attended this event in August of 2009.

The third family came to the study by way of a recommendation of my aunt who was aware I was conducting the study. My aunt shared the invitation flyer with the mother of the 3rd family and she contacted me interested in participating in the study.

The invitation to participate outlined the requirements for interested participants which were as follows:

- a. Latin American (from South, Central) but Spanish-speaking
- b. Arrived in Canada between the mid-1990s to 2006.
- c. Migrated directly from Latin American country to Canada (ie. not via the United States or another country first).
- d. Currently possess documented status in Canada
- e. Have children who reside in the same family home that are currently attending school in the Toronto area.

The sampling of my study was non-random, criterion in that I chose Latin American families among the many groups of minority communities that exist within Toronto. The snowball recruiting approach employed allowed me to gather a broad range of family experiences even among the 3 families. Among the participants there was diversity in the
places of origin of the families, family composition (number of children etc.), time of immigration and length of time in Canada. Although the Spanish-speaking exclusion left out some people who are Latin American but Portuguese-speaking, I am only fluent in Spanish thus limiting my ability to work with the Portuguese-Latin American community. The time of immigration criteria acted to make the research current and focused on the issues that are affected by current immigration and educational policy. I chose to interview participants who have immigrated directly to Canada in order to avoid comparing conceptions of parent involvement that may emerge within another immigrant receiving country and Canada. This is not to negate the value of this comparison, but rather because this contrast is beyond the scope of this project. The intention behind this item was to exclude comparisons that might be made between experiences of education in the United States and Canada which although similar have very distant philosophical and political influences that color the experience. All 3 families met these requirements with one exception. The Suarez-Madarriaga family, had Fernando, the father, migrate to Canada via the United States and then apply to seek asylum in Canada. The rest of his family, his wife and 2 children, however, migrated directly to Canada and so they were included in the study despite Fernando’s experience since the children only had schooling experiences in Colombia and Canada. Similarly, the criterion of having acquired status in Canada serves the purpose of narrowing the participant pool. While it is well recorded that a large part of the Latin American population are undocumented, the experience of current refugee claimants is a very complex one which might bear too great an influence on the narrative of schooling and schooling institutions as access to these is denied to undocumented under legal rhetoric. At the time of the study, one of the families was in the process of acquiring landed status and had been through the refugee claimant process. I deemed that this had not affected the experience of education in terms of access to schooling to such a degree that it was not comparable with the other families and therefore continued the data collection and included them in the study. Finally, the last criterion is included because of the most of the high density Latin American population areas in Ontario are within the borders of the city of Toronto (City of Toronto, 2008). Additionally, the focus on an urban setting will bring issues of class into the discussion. This is valuable because the intersection of race, class and gender is a useful approach for
understanding the lived experiences of non-dominant culture individuals and families. All of the families lived within the Greater Toronto Area spanning the East, North Central and West sides of the city.

In the invitation to participate, participants were asked to contact me, the principal investigator, in order to obtain further information. Once the families contacted me either by email or phone I provided them with further information about the study and the requirements of their participation. After this I arranged a time convenient for them to review the requirements again as well as complete the informed consent documentation. At this time, family members asked questions that they had about the study and their participation. Following the completion of the consent documentation I began data collection which will be detailed in the next section.

4.5 Data Collection

Life history is an approach that gathers a narrative telling of participants lived experiences as the body of data to be used for research analysis and theorizing. Life history assumes that the insider perspective is the most valuable to study the social experiences of any individual, that is the individual’s perspective itself (Denzin 1978). The key to this is the subjective essence of the data (Atkinson 2001).

One instrument for data collection in life history research is interviewing. It would appear that open-ended semi-structured interviews would lend themselves best to the process of inviting participants to share their personal narratives. Denzin (1978) broadens this stating that “any interview schedule that permits subject to express their opinions” (p. 229) can be utilized in life history research. He goes on to suggest that even traditionally structured parts of the interview such as the initial identification of the subject can be more personalized. This can be accomplished by using a guide outlining the necessary information and permitting the participant to use it as a guide and rearrange it as necessary. This approach also serves to counter the modernist tendencies of interviews which promote rigorous adherence to protocols; acquire relevant answers; minimize researcher influences and in general subscribe to quantitative ideals (Alvesson 2002). Qualitative interviewing, as opposed to survey interviews, challenge the role of
the interviewer as detached and neutral. Rapley (2004) advocates for non-neutral interviews which is concerned with treating participants as humans and disclose our personal selves while we learn about the other’s selves and our own. Atkinson (2001) also signals a particular characteristic of life history which is its abundance of data. Life history provides a broad foundation of data from which to draw insight and understanding. This has consequences for the analysis portion of the research which will be taken up in a later section of this text.

For this study, I employed open-ended interviews heeding Denzin’s recommendation and using the interview protocol as a flexible guide for participants. Using the interview guide, I interviewed each member of the family individually and then all members together as a unit. The first interview with each individual lasted between 3-4 hours for each adult and approximately 1 hour for the child participants. The first interview addressed the following themes:

a. Introduction: Participant data including: name, age, country of origin, occupation.
b. Immigration experience: including process of immigrants and initial settlement experience
c. Schooling experience pre-immigration: Schooling experience of children and parents, relationships with schools and school officials
d. Schooling experiences post-immigration: Schooling experiences of children and parents, initial experiences with schools and school officials
e. Family Life: everyday practices around schooling and education, roles, activities of family members and extended family members is applicable.

The questions listed were not directly asked of the participants but rather they were asked to narrate experiences on these aspects of their lives: immigration, schooling etc. The interview questions were addressed to the participants in the language of their preference, either Spanish or English. Only 2 of the child participants chose English. For the younger children, the questions were phrased appropriately so that they might be able to narrate their experiences. Additionally, some questions did not apply to children who
immigrated at a very young age and these were skipped. Follow-up questions were addressed to the participants in order to further develop themes and lines of conversation.

The second interview was a group interview with all the members of the family present and typically lasted 1-2 hours. During this interview one main theme was addressed to gather input from all members of the family:

a. The Future: Plans and aspirations for their family, educational/career for both parents and children.

The reasoning for having the first interview individually and the second collectively was that so that individual actors within the family unit had the opportunity to narrate their history of immigration and school as they experienced it. If both interviews had been collective, members might have hesitated to share certain parts of their story, particularly parents with children. The second interview added to the richness of the family life history collected as it documented the current relationships both as they were described by the actors and also as they played out in the dialogue of the conversation. While the first interview dealt with the pre- and post-immigration and current experiences of the family and its members; the second interview built on these and projected towards the future to allow for the observations of how past and present experiences build the future. This move from past to present reflects the central concern of this project which is the current conceptions that exist on minority parent involvement. Candida Smith (2003) asserts that narratives are teleological in nature in that their elements facilitate the appearance of the ending. Thus dividing the two sections of the interview into these topical categories aligns with this narrative flow and might even facilitate its development.

4.6 Analysis and Representation

Atkinson (2001) notes that the first step of interpretation is often simply transcribing the interviews that are conducted. In this process, decisions about what to include and exclude and how the narrative is recorded are interpretive decisions. For this project, I
transcribed the interviews literally including the interviewer’s participation and any repetitions of the narrator in the text.

These transcriptions were then coded for key themes and ideas. One particular approach which I used is what Charmaz (2006) calls in vivo coding. That is codes that are borne out of participants’ own terms for certain ideas and themes. Coding serves to summarize and account for the different elements of the data by categorizing the whole of the data into smaller parts (Charmaz 2006). The process of coding leads to the generation of concepts (Coffey 1996, Gray 2003) thereby acting as a step in the analytical process. The concepts that emerge, however, are influenced also by the analytical approach and the positions assumed.

For this work, I employed narrative analysis as the approach to making sense of the data produced (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995). In her contribution to a recent volume on multicultural education and narrative experience, Sofia A. Villenas (2005) outlines key aspects of narrative analysis as applied to life history research. She highlights two key aspects of narrative analysis: the interactive and the performative. The interactive deals with the text that is produced in the relationship between the narrator and the researcher, the text that is at once collaborative and differentiating. While the text is produced in the conversation of the interview within that creation each of the actors are positioned in certain ways. Villenas highlights that her positionality as a “Chicana academic…and mother” (p. 81) and “daughter of Latino immigrant parents from Ecuador” (p. 71) that emerged in the transcribed interviews and how this differed from but contributed to the construction of the mothers’ narratives. The context of the life history interview is a very particular one which influences significantly the narrative that is borne of the interactions therein (Rapley 2004, Alvesson 2002). Rapley (2004) notes that researchers often erroneously assume that an interview is only about the topic but may in fact be about the social interaction that takes place between the actors. This interactive aspect goes beyond the content of the narrative. The words spoken within the context of the interview also go beyond the actors present to utterances spoken previously by actors outside of the interview (Bakhtin qtd in Villenas 2005). Thus, the words spoken are in response and reaction to these previous actions. The space of the life history interview is a particular
one which is at once a conversation and a transformation as the participants moves from a “repository of opinions and reasons or a wellspring of emotion” into “a productive source of knowledge” (Alvesson 2002, p. 109). This concept of the interactive served as a valuable conceptual instrument in beginning the analysis of the transcripts which were produced from this research. Like Villenas, I had to inspect the positions of the actors within the interview, including my own, and also those actors that have spoken outside of the interview (practitioners, policy makers and researchers within the education system).

The second aspect of narrative analysis that she highlights is the performative. She identifies this as the interstitial space between “the telling and the told” (p.75). This aspect points to the constructivist traditions of life history; that act of constructing certain selves that narrators engage in as they narrate their lives. In analysis, the researcher must be attuned to the selves that are created by participants in relation to the one another and to the members of other groups (Villenas 2005, Candida Smith 2003). During interviews in particular, Rapley (2004) notes that individuals can speak for themselves or on behalf of broader collectives. Alvesson (2002) also comments that interviewees may be politically or socially motivated to share stories for the purpose of having particular issues represented in certain forms. This was an important aspect of this research as the positionings of Latino families vis-à-vis dominant culture families emerged particularly in practices around liaisoning with school.

Within quantitative positivistic research modes, issues of validity and reliability are paramount. These are tended to by mechanisms such as reproduction and triangulation. In qualitative research, these elements are a concern insofar as the analysis made and the explanations offered can be verified and understood as valid. With life history research, because of its emphasis on the subjective, performative and interactive, these issues are addressed in ways differing from quantitative approaches. Atkinson (2001) mentions that reliability in life history is determined by the internal consistency of the story. Validity, he claims, exists at the fit between the information that is received and what is expected. Both of these guiding principles, however, are subject to the spirit of life history which is its subjectivity and the importance of symbolism (Atkinson 2001, Candida Smith 2003). What this means is that the narrator is the final authority on validity and reliability.
Inconsistencies may emerge but this can be understood as the inconsistencies that exist in life and in the constructed nature of the narrative which are about the past but may serve present purposes (Candida Smith 2003). It is the narrator that determines what is consistent at a particular moment in how she/he makes sense of the history. What is important in narrative research in regards to validity and reliability is the insight into the subjective “symbolic frameworks” (Candida Smith 2003, p.204) of each participant; how they make sense of what happened in their life history. The existence of regularities across the different interviews can signal these community discourses. Silences can also point to aspects of a shared experience that have not yet been mediated by a collective interpretation (Candida Smith 2003).

The “faithful rendering of the subject’s experience and interpretation of the world he lives in” (Becker, qtd in Denzin 1978) best describes the final stage of life history research. Life history analysis is rooted in an idiographic tendencies (Denzin 1978). That is to say that rather than aiming to use the case to illuminate the reality of the larger group of apparently similar cases, life history research acknowledges that cases may be unique and not shared. This does not negate the fact however that aspects of an individual’s life history may in fact illuminate the experience of the larger group. As Candida Smith (2003) points out the personal narratives can provide instances of community discourses about shared experiences of the past and collective conclusions on these experiences. Unlike positivistic research, life history research does not aim to disprove or prove a hypothesis. Nevertheless, this does not mean that a researcher’s predetermined assumptions about what a case will entail or how it will play out is not taken into account. Instead, this is considered a key element of the research and is acknowledged as having a significant influence on the research without being seen as normative.

4.7 Life History: Challenges

The life history approach is not without its weaknesses. Failing to make the connection between the data gleaned from the participant data and the context within which it is situated is among the greatest challenges of this methodology (Cary 1999). However, there are scholars who also problematize the epistemological foundations of life history. Cary (1999) for instance questions from a poststructuralist perspective the romanticizing
of voice, the normalizing of emerging narratives, the assumptions of the subject that knows herself/himself and the redemptive project of research. These are all valid criticisms which should inspire life history researchers to engage in a reflective praxis that acknowledges power differentials in the research task, includes disruptive stories and considers the fluidity of self and its multiple interpretations.

In eliciting the personal narratives of participants, the researcher must always be conscious of her/his attitude towards the narrative (Chase 2005). There is a certain responsibility and respect that must be attended to which implies attention to diversity in the telling, the reading and the interpretation and the narrator’s and reader’s response. Issues of voice are also an ethical concern in narrative inquiry. While desiring to represent the voice of the narrator, caution must be taken to avoid romanticizing the voice and essentializing the experiences narrated. Atkinson (2001) describes this as the tension between personal and research relevance of life histories. These real concerns in this project were mitigated through respectful and ethical relationship building with participants throughout the research process.

One of the strongest criticisms of qualitative research in general that comes from positivistic camps is that its emphasis on interpretation makes for an overly subjective understanding of reality that is then used to further political agendas. While this is a valid criticism within the interpretive framework of positivism and hard science, it is important to note that qualitative research is not unforthcoming about its critical position in regards to the positivist or post-positivist traditions of empirical study (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). In fact, the diminishing of representativeness and emphasis on subjectivity is considered a strength of the approach (Goodson and Sykes 2001).

Although narrating a life history can be very beneficial to the participants as they grow in understanding themselves through a collaborative construction of identity that occurs in the research, caution must also be taken due to the personal and often sensitive nature of the narrative content. Atkinson (2001) warns that the effects of participating in a life history research endeavor may result in either negative or positive outcomes. This is a risk that must be assumed in life history research. Many of the episodes recounted by the
participants were moving and at some points they were brought to tears, however, reassuring them of the value of their narrative to understanding the experiences of immigrant families helped to ease the difficulty of these memories.

Having established the importance of recognizing the way that culture mitigates personal narratives and the importance of researchers recognizing that their views on narratives might not be shared by their participants, I want to explore briefly a methodological tension that exists in my study. Although I am a Latina scholar and would consider myself an insider into Latin American culture, I cannot deny the distance that exists at times between my Latina identity and my scholarly work or my profession as a teacher. Though I am fluent in Spanish and strive to use the language not only as a “home language” but in many kinds of dialogic interactions, most of my academic work has been in English beginning from an early age and English is my preferred language of choice. For me, this means that when I am approaching an academic discussion it is framed in English which in some ways implicates its framing it within North American, Western, Middle Class, White, professional perspective. This makes me then an outsider even as I worked with the texts of Latinos in Toronto. What that meant was that at times I struggled to identify with and interpret holistically and respectfully the narratives. It also means that my research maybe coloured by Western assumptions about identity and self (Chase 2005) as opposed to non-Western conceptions of these. Similarly, this tension existed and was present for many of the 2nd generation immigrant children that I interviewed as well as some of the 1st generation parents. Throughout this process I aimed to be actively conscious of the diverse experiences and subjectivities that are contained within the expansive and heterogeneous group that is the Latino American Diaspora. Finally, the dichotomous experience of being both insider/outsider was a strength of this work that made the work transparent and rich, yet at the same time critical and illuminating. The opportunity to straddle this very delicate position must never be taken for granted.

In the following chapters the life histories of each of the 3 participant families will be narrated followed by an analysis of common themes.
Chapter 5
Suarez-Madarriaga Family

The Suarez-Madarriaga family, composed of Fernando, Estela and their two children Francisco age 11 and Alicia age 4, currently live in the east-end of Toronto. I contacted the Suarez-Madarriaga family through Paulina a Spanish-speaking settlement worker in their children’s school. Paulina assisted the research process by sharing the call for participants with the families she worked with who might be interested in participating in the study. Estela received the invitation and contacted me through email in mid-July 2009. After discussing the specifics of the research project with Estela we set up an appointment for a Friday afternoon. We met at her apartment so that she could avoid alternative childcare arrangements for her younger daughter Alicia. During her interview the children were watching a video and then playing in their rooms. I returned the next day, Saturday, early in the morning with some breakfast snacks and was able to complete the individual interview with her son. During her son’s interview Estela and Alicia went down to do laundry and came back up to fold it in the bedroom. Fernando’s interview was not scheduled until the following Saturday when he had a day off. We met early in the morning and completed his individual interview just after noon. Estela had been cooking in the kitchen from early in the morning and the family invited me to have lunch with them. Our casual conversation provided further insight into their family life and history and their current experience. After a leisurely lunch and some strong Colombian coffee we drove to the local school where Francisco was enrolled in daycamp. With the whole family now at home we completed the family focus group and concluded the data collection process.

5.1 Fernando

Fernando was 39 years old at the time of his interview. He comes from a large family of 14 siblings involved in the cattle and ranching industries in Colombia. He recounts how his father entered that industry through his mother’s family:

My father was very poor. My father hauled mules when he was a little boy. My grandpa would burn coal and he had to take the coal on the mules from a town to
the city. They would split an egg among 3 or 4 people and they had very poor nutrition. Then my father was a textile worker in a large textile factory in Colombia. Then he founded, then he started to work in a butcher shop because my mother’s brothers were, from my grandfather on my mother’s side were butchers. And they made him into a butcher and then the whole family on my father’s side butchers. And so my dad worked in a butcher shop his whole life he has his own business since he was very young and had ranches and a tile factory and all kinds of factories, poultry, all kinds, all kinds. My mother the same. My mother melted pork lard to sell it as a type of butter and I would go and sell door to door and everything.²

Since his father was a well-established entrepreneur in the cattle industry, Fernando’s childhood was characterized by abundance:

In my house we never lacked for food, mother and father, my whole life. My mother cooked really good, really well and she made all kinds of things sweets, main dishes, all sorts. And my dad put food on the table his whole life all types of fruit. We lived in abundance, thank God, because my father endured a lot of hunger first.

Fernando’s parents’ strong work ethic was shared by their children and influenced their experience of formal education. Fernando explains:

My father I think that he would say that we all liked working because I have a brother who is a doctor, a surgeon. He is the only one who made a career of education. The rest of my siblings are secondary school graduates but most of them didn’t finish, most of them stayed in 4th, 3rd or 2nd level.

² Participant excerpts from interviews conducted in Spanish were translated to English by principal investigator except where otherwise noted.
³Colombian Secondary education is divided into 2 sections basic secondary (grades 6th to 9th) and mid secondary (grades 10th and 11th).
All our life we’ve been hard workers that’s why perhaps our education, again, it hasn’t been the greatest.

Fernando’s parents worked hard to provide material comforts but also strived to provide a moral education for their children. Fernando describes the values that they shared with their children:

My mother and father have taken great pains so that we could be good people, so that we didn’t do wrong to anyone, so that we didn’t have vices, and they set a good example.

Fernando had responsibilities within the family business concurrently with his obligations as student from an early age. He shares a glimpse into his daily life:

In the morning I would clean the pens. I would feed the animals…Before going to school, I would shower and then go to school. When I returned I did the same, ate lunch and returned again to look after the animals. I did homework later and returned again at night.

Fernando did not complete secondary school and left school at a very young age. His reasons for leaving school were a combination of factors that intersected in his 6th year of schooling:

The year before, my brother had withdrawn [from school] to work with my father. My brother is 3 years older than me and he had withdrawn and so that prompted me too to ask why he left and to see how he was doing, how I was doing. We were in the same school although he was in higher grade. So I think that that influenced me. The year before I had failed a grade, I didn’t pass and I was repeating it, and I was repeating it in another school. The school was much better but I don’t know I didn’t feel well. One day, my father was taking me to school,

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4 Fernando left in the 1st level of basic secondary. This is equivalent to 6th Grade. See note 1 this chapter
and I told him no that I was going to keep going to the butcher shop and I kept going and I didn’t keep studying.

Fernando had struggled with schooling from a very early age and was aware of his challenges early on:

Well, at school my marks were never the best. I liked mathematics a lot I liked mathematics, I liked a lot of things but my penmanship didn’t help much. Since I was very young I knew that and I don’t know things didn’t go well for me at school.

Despite these early challenges, however, Fernando persisted. When he decided to leave school and go to work in the family business, his father responded favorably. He already had a role in the family business and this freed up more time for him to perform his duties.

Although Fernando left school at very young age, he believes that his life experience particularly his work experience from a young age has provided him with a valuable education.

So I would see that I didn’t study, I didn’t finish high school I wasn’t in the bank or anything but I know how to do what I like and I know how to do it. And I think that in that I differentiate myself from many people who have studies, I know that it’s not that I am discrediting studying but instead I am of the idea that I have acquired it with experience. I have also had people along side me who have taught me and who have known many things.

5.2 Estela

At the time of the interview Estela was 39 years old and had been in Canada for only about 1 year and half. Estela grew up in a very small family with her parents and 2 brothers. She fondly remembers the close relationship she had with her parents and particularly her late father. Although Estela’s family was of working class status, her
parents made great sacrifices for the sake of their formal education which included a large religious and moral component.

My brothers and I, my parents always provided for our studies in the best private schools in Medellin. I studied with nuns, I did everything, everything from first grade until grade 11 I completed in the same school and I left feeling happy, and prepared. I loved it and I think that I had very good training moral and religious, everything academic all of that.

Also, well, we studied at great sacrifice in that school, in those schools because as I was telling you they were private schools and they were expensive. They were among the most expensive schools in Medellin. And my parents, my father, my mother did not work; she was a housewife, my father worked for us 3 to support the family and he earned little. Nonetheless my father was always responsible and he supported us and he got us ahead, the 3 of us as far as he could my father gave us his best.

Despite their best efforts, financial challenges still affected Estela’s educational experience as she recounts:

As I was saying, when I was in grade six my father was laid off from the factory, he worked in a textile company. Several workers had to leave and among them my father, he was laid off. So that was horrible and I cried. So my mother would say to me, “Daughter, you will not be able to continue at this school, we are going to have take you out of this school”, something like that. And I would cry my mother would tell me that they had to transfer me to a school with boys, a co-ed school that would be a public school. So I would cry, “Mommy no, I don’t want that, I don’t want that”. I was like I told you in 6th grade, like my son so that was the most traumatic experience for m, in my student life. I suffered, I cried I would say mommy no anything else but, let’s do anything but please don’t take me out. Finally my mother seeing the damage that they were going to do to me, well the anguish with which I was living, they decided that I would continue and
Yeah well the situation improved, my father got a job and I was able to, I was able to finish there.

Estela’s parents’ sacrifices for the sake of the formal education of her brothers and her produced different results for each sibling. Estela was a judicious and hardworking student who had good results in school and as she puts it her parents never suffered for her sake:

They never had to suffer because of me because I didn’t make them suffer by not wanting to study or because no, no they always lived well, happy with me because I, like I told you, I didn’t put them in any difficult situation because of my studies, no not at all.

Her youngest brother had similar results. He was able to attend post-secondary studies in Business Administration and Accounting. Estela’s other brother had a more relaxed attitude towards his education. Estela remembers that his experience caused her mother much undue suffering. His behavior and performance caused him to fall behind in school and eventually he was asked to leave. Estela’s parents and especially her mother worked diligently for 2 years to get him re-enrolled in a good school. All of these challenges were a great burden on Estela’s parents.

Estela remembers not only the financial and moral support that her parents provided but also their direct involvement in her schoolwork, something which she has continued with her children.

Both of them stayed with us to do our homework, they didn’t do it for us. Fernando, he says to me, “Don’t do their homework”. I tell him, Fernando, I’m not doing their homework. For example in Colombia… I remember I would sit to work I mean I make earrings and little things like that I learned to do when I was at home, I wasn’t working I would come home and I would start making little things and my son was there, I would study with him or I kept him company. He would always ask me, “Mommy,” he would say “Mommy will you stay with me”. I would sit with him and my husband would pass by “What are you doing?”
“We’re doing homework.” “What do you mean you’re doing homework, you don’t have homework?” “No I’m not doing homework; I’m just keeping our son company.” He always says to me “Don’t do his homework for him”. I am not doing his homework; I’m just keeping him company.

Estela went on to complete secondary school and did technical post-secondary studies in Business Administration through her employer, a bank. This included courses in customer service, marketing, sales and public relations.

5.3 Pre-Migration

Estela and Fernando met after completing high school through a mutual contact that was Estela’s cousin. They had a short engagement and married as they were entering their mid-20s. Within 4 years their family grew first with the birth of their son and then their daughter 5 years later. Francisco and Alicia who were both born in Medellin, Colombia.

Their young family was very close to both sides of the extended family but particularly to Estela’s side after the loss of her father. From very early on in their marriage, they lived within a block of Estela’s mother and spent a lot of time with her. When they were able to purchase a home they settled just blocks away from Estela’s mother’s home.

With two working parents and their close proximity, Estela’s mother became a primary caregiver for their son during the workweek. On the weekends, Estela and her children spent time at their grandmother’s house. Eventually, the family sought out a larger house where they could all live together. Their family was then a multi-generational household which included grandparents and uncles for the children.

Only Francisco, Estela and Fernando’s son, attended school in Colombia before immigrating to Canada since Alicia was not school aged. It was his grandmother who was there on his first day. Fernando recalls:

Well, Francisco started at a preschool when he was about two and half years old. Her mother took him, Estela’s mother I mean his grandmother took him to preschool and she was sad to leave him there and didn’t want to leave him, but my son went in ahead of her and he didn’t turn around. He stayed there super
happy. And she was sad instead thinking he was going to be upset, but she was the one who was upset.

Francisco’s formal education began in kindergarten at a Catholic school in which he remained until his family migrated to Canada. Francisco’s parents appreciated the school’s high expectations and rigor both academically and morally, which resembled their own experience, particularly Estela’s. She describes it:

> With our son I also wanted the same and since he was in kindergarten it’s called “en transición” over there, he went to a school that we liked for a while. It was also run by priests, fathers of the Order of the Sacred Heart …The case is that it’s a very good school and it’s very strict…Many parents even took their children out because they realized that they couldn’t do it, they couldn’t do it.

As a student Francisco performed well at school and was well loved by his teachers according to his parents. He enjoyed school and particularly Social Studies. His greatest challenge was with Mathematics. Francisco’s best memories relate to experiences of success in his academic work while his worst memories are of his challenges with mathematics and having to do remedial classes during summer vacation. When speaking about his schooling experience Francisco made comparisons between Colombian and Canadian schools and his experience within them. He states:

> The school in Colombia is a little bit bigger. The people in Colombia, there isn’t like so much diversity in the people like here there are lots of people of different culture and in Colombia there isn’t. It is seems to me like in Colombia they talk more, like the explain things more…For example in Science in Colombia for example it’s all day talking, like giving a lesson to the students and then you have a short time to do the work but the majority of the class is explaining. Here rather it’s like most it’s like here in school they’ll tell you for example you have to find this in this book but they don’t really tell you what you have to do and then you have the rest of the class to do it.
Francisco’s parents’ involvement in the school took various forms. Estela and her mother being the main caregivers were most involved in monitoring her son’s experience.

So I stayed in touch with them and I wanted to know how he was doing at school, I would write a little note, I need an appointment please can you arrange this and they would receive me. Here I don’t see that happening, no, but over there I would send a little note. They had a schedule at the beginning of the year. They gave us a list where it had this teacher is free at this and this time and you can choose the appointment; send a request a couple of days before. I would send in a request for an appointment…They cooperated with me by receiving me and telling me yes or no he’s doing well, he’s missing this, we’ve seen him distracted or more focused, he’s participating well, other times they would tell me he’s taking it easy. They helped me to keep up with things. I said I can’t let my son get lost, or fail a grade or fail a subject here because I am sitting back taking it easy. No, I was on top of things all the time and my supervision and my mother’s too she would always say, “Elena, your son, how is he doing at school, make sure he isn’t falling behind.”

Fernando and Estela also depended on the support of their extended family with Fernando’s education. Estela’s mother, Francisco’s grandmother, was always concerned about his performance at school and provided practical childcare for Alicia when Estela was assisting Fernando. She describes her mother’s role:

So my mother was always concerned about my son, if he was doing well in school, “How is he doing in school and why don’t you ask for an appointment” and I was like “Yes, mother”.

Many times I had to go to the library with my son to study with him…I would tell my mother, “Mom, I’m going to go with my son and because he has too much to study and with my daughter here we’re not going to be able to do it.” She would stay with my daughter and I would go with my son. That’s why I’m telling you that my mother was so important in the raising and the development of my children, so important.
Estela also had a close relationship with another parent of a child in Francisco’s class. They supported each other to stay informed about their children’s responsibilities, performance and progress in collaboration with the school. She speaks about the dynamics of this relationship:

Like always he had a friend and so the 2 of them were more or less similar so I would communicate, I went and made friends with the mother, so I would talk with her. She would call me and ask me, “Estela, do me a favor can you tell me what is for homework today because Jorge doesn’t want to, he didn’t bring his agenda.” So sometimes Francisco would forget it and sometimes Jorge so we like help each other like that.

The school also communicated with Francisco’s parents in a variety of ways both individually (Parent-Teacher interviews) and in groups. Elena explains the different avenues:

They would have these meetings every for example not only every two months when reports were handed out. We had to go and receive the personalized written and oral report for each student…All the parents in 5th grade were called to a meeting at about 6 in the afternoon. So all the parents in 5th grade would go and they would start talking about all sorts of things. Sometimes they would talk about it was 5 groups of 5th grade so the principal would talk about what the school was doing, all the activities that were planned for the upcoming term. At the same time they would cover important topics they would have lectures with good with the teachers and the group of parents in that class. So it was like were more informed you don’t see that here.

In addition to these scheduled instances of structured communication, Francisco also recalls an exchange between his parents and a teacher that took place outside of these times in a more informal setting. He describes it:

When I was in kindergarten there was a 1st grade teacher, she was a good teacher so I wanted her to be my teacher. So I told my dad if we could ask because on
Saturdays she was at the pool in the same school. So that we should go and my dad went with me and they spoke and my father and mother stayed talking to her and she said that yes that next year I could be in her class but then after they stayed talking for another half an hour with the teacher.

Both of Francisco’s parents, Estela in particular because of her more frequent contact with the school, were knowledgeable about the policies and procedures of his school in Medellin. Estela explains in detail how the school supported struggling students through a credit recovery system at the end of the school year:

So even though education in Colombia is very strict at least in secondary school, I don’t mean in all of them because in the school where my son was they had to complete certain activities, certain things and the one who didn’t do it like for example the ones who were doing well in that semester started their summer vacation on say Monday. The ones who were more behind they didn’t start on Monday but say on Wednesday. Others would start summer vacation on Friday. Others were delayed. So they would reward them like that. So the last ones to go on summer vacation were the ones who were doing really poorly and those who definitely couldn’t do it would get tested, that week was for reinforcement.

5.4 Migration

The Suarez-Madarriaga’s family migration experience is set within the context of a significant migratory movement from Colombia to Canada during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Emigration from Colombia is predicated on a number of push factors some of which include the humanitarian crisis that Colombia faced during this time; increased violence and escalation of the armed conflict between guerilla groups and the state and the economic crisis at the end of the 1990s (Alcalá and Barrero 2008). As a result of these conditions, Colombian migration to Canada had the greatest growth in comparison to other countries during this period and in 2005 was the primary source nation of refugee claimants to Canada. Migration from this country stands out as it is refugee claimants that predominantly populate it as opposed to family and economic class migration as in other source nations from the region. At the Canadian end, changes in legislative climate
through the introduction of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which allowed Canadian Border Services Agency’s agents to receive refugee applications at the border also impacted the flow of migration from Colombia (Alcalá and Barrero 2008) and points to Canada’s position as the 2nd largest receiving nation of Colombian refugees in the world (Alcalá et al. 2008).

The decision to leave Colombia was difficult one for Fernando and the rest of his family as it came suddenly and was driven by the insecurity and threats his livelihood and family’s safety because of his family’s business. Both Estela and Fernando mentioned experiences of extortion, robbery, threats, persecution and other unsafe situations that caused them great fear and overnight drove them to flee the country. Fernando left Colombia first, very suddenly with his Father and Stepmother. Fernando and his family had never planned to emigrate from Colombia. Both his departure and that of his family was facilitated by the fact that they had previously acquired a Visitor Visa to the United States of America. They had planned to use this VISA to vacation in Disneyworld, instead it was used as to get Fernando out of the country expeditiously.

Fernando left Colombia in 2005 and arrived in Connecticut where he spent the next 18 months. During this time, Fernando was employed in various positions in an attempt to provide for his family back in Colombia. He describes some of these jobs and the balancing act that he had to perform when he had multiple ones:

I acquired a job at McDonald’s I worked at night. Within a few months I acquired a job in construction and that job lasted me for 1 year and half and I worked in construction from Monday to Friday. I acquired the part time job after at McDonald’s and I worked at both at the same time. I was at McDonald’s for about 8 months…So apart from that I acquired a job at a carwash. Later on I acquired a job washing dishes at Mexican restaurant. I would finish at the construction site, go home, shower and leave to go wash dishes until midnight.

His work was made even more difficult because of his limited English skills and the abuse of employers and customers as a result of his undocumented status. While in the United States, Fernando also began English language classes at the prompting of a work
colleague and his landlord who observed him using a book of common phrases to learn the language. In December of 2007, Fernando decided to seek asylum in Canada since he did not possess legal status in the United States and found it difficult to be gainfully employed as an undocumented person. After one particular incident, which signaled the increase in immigration raids around his area, Fernando made the decision to leave the United States. He describes the incident:

Once while I was at the car wash they made us leave, everyone was yelling and screaming because immigration was coming. And I have to drop everything and run like crazy. I got into a colleague’s care, he was Brazilian and he drove like crazy the freeway and I was the most scared of everyone. Later on I went back to that job and the boss told me no, that he couldn’t keep living me work that it was too risky and whatever and I lost that job.

The family’s decision to migrate and the migration process greatly affected inter-familial relationships as well as Francisco’s education. The period of separation while Fernando was in the United States was a difficult and trying time for the family. In addition to the physical demands of maintaining multiple jobs, Fernando had to battle with loneliness, the increasing tension with his family and the uncertainty of being reunited with them. Fernando describes his anguish during this time:

The hardest thing that used to hit was the loneliness of being away from my Family. Oh God! On those walls I would cry, write their names, so many things would go through my mind, good and bad things…But on top of the physical exhaustion, there’s the feelings, things, problems, challenges. Not knowing if you’re going to see your family again if you are going to be with them.

Although the family communicated during this time of separation, relationships were strained. Fernando and Estela’s spousal relationship was especially fragile as there was conflict over the decision to migrate and disagreement about how and when reunification might occur. Fernando recalls the strained communication with his wife:
Sometimes the relationship wasn’t good because of the financial part, many times because of the decision that I took. My wife would say that more than my fear I left because I was attached to my father. But in reality it was the real physical fear and real threats… My wife and I would fight over problems all the time over the phone. It was very difficult…I felt like she was very distant. When I would talk to her on the phone it was like talking to an enemy. I had just arrived in the United States and one of the first phone calls that I made to here, I had left her money that she could have for a few months. I didn’t know how long I was going to be, what I was going to do. I told her I was going to leave her a good amount of money. At the time I wasn’t working at McDonald’s at night. I called her and she told me that she needed money and if I didn’t send it then I could forget about seeing my kids. For the love of God! Such terrible things! Of course she resented me, I had left her and all of that. Such horrible things!

Fernando’s relationship with his children was also affected by the time of separation. He was unable to disclose his whereabouts to his son and the communication between them was limited given his son’s young age. Francisco also remembers that challenges they faced in communicating with his father during this time:

It was very sad because my dad would call all the time and the conversation would disconnect all the time. Or we would talk over the internet and the computer, he didn’t know how to use the computer very well, so the connection would drop and everything.

His relationship with his daughter developed in a particularly challenging manner since he left Colombia when she was only 1 year old. Estela describes the unique challenges that this time of separation caused:

In his relationship with our daughter, our son since he was 6 he got to know that part of his father, the hard part of a strict father and now with our daughter. Our daughter was 1 year old when he came here. It was like my daughter came to meet and know her father when she came here.
Estela’s family provided additional emotional support to her and her children during this difficult time. She and her children moved in with her mother and brothers. After one of her brothers got married he continued to play a significant role in the children’s lives which Estela describes as a “father figure”.

Before Fernando crossed the border into Canada, Estela and her two children flew to Connecticut to spend time with their husband and father. There was much uncertainty at what would happen to the family after Estela and the children returned to Colombia and Fernando attempted to enter Canada. As immigration raids in and around his area increased and the expiration of his Visitor’s VISA to the United States approached, he made his way to Buffalo to cross the border into Canada. His sister who was residing in Toronto had encouraged her brother, father and Stepmother to apply for asylum in Canada after learning they were forced to flee Colombia.

After being accepted as a convention refugee, Fernando, his Father and Stepmother entered into Canada and reunited with Fernando’s sister and her husband. In the early days of their arrival, Fernando and his Father and Step-Mother lived in his sister’s apartment. Soon after, they moved into a two-bedroom apartment which they shared. Shortly after arriving, Fernando began working but it was several months before he found secure employment. He describes his employment experiences:

First, I acquired a job at a butcher at night. I had to go and move the meat, unload boxes from a truck...Then with a help of a friend of a friend I was placed at a large bakery to do the cleaning…I was there for some time on the weekends only. They only called me in like 2 times during the week and I went to work at the bakery not cleaning but making some pitas. I had to put cheese into a machine that would grate the cheese and later I had to make some holes in the bread with a pointy rolling pin, different jobs. Then other days I was packing, packing the bread. Well and then I acquired a little part-time job in a Portuguese butcher. I was there for a bit. After that, I acquired a part time at a meat department at No Frills and now I am full time at a Greek butcher for Mr. Greek.
During this time Fernando also resumed his English language training. He persisted with his classes despite the distance from his home and work until his family arrived. He took some time off once they were settling in and then resumed classes again but found that the challenges of managing his time between work, school and family and the impossible demands of his instructor prevented him from continuing. He explains:

So I live always running around, catching buses, getting the kids to school, running here, running there, grocery shop this that and the other thing. And that teacher was always after me because we weren’t allowed to arrive late, we couldn’t get out of our seats, we couldn’t have cell phones and other things. She wanted us to learn and I understand that but often you can’t concentrate because our mind is on problems and other things.

Estela’s decision to reunite with her husband was a difficult one that she deliberated over with great anguish. The idea of leaving her family behind and entering a period of unpredictability and uncertainty made it increasingly difficult to see the benefits of leaving Colombia with her children. She recalls how shortly after arriving her decision to migrate caused her great turmoil:

And so leaving there, the thing is I sometimes found myself saying, “Oh my God, why did I do this. I shouldn’t have done this, my children”. I mean I lived with resentment towards my husband because I would think it’s not right, he should have done, gone and left us. He could have fixed things another way. I saw things from different point of view. I would say to myself, “What will be of my mother.” To have exchanged I mean the tranquility, happiness of being there, I mean I lived well in my country, I had my job and everything to come here and face problems and challenges…So I would say to myself, “Perhaps, my God, I don’t want to be here, I want to be with my mother, with my family. It was a mistake, why did I do it. It’s my fault.”

Her decision to emigrate was also affected by the disruption and discontinuity that it would cause for her children and their education, particularly Francisco who was already
school age. When Fernando left Francisco’s performance at school declined which was a cause for concern for Francisco and Estela. Estela explains her concern:

Our son had a good academic level but not excellent but not poor either. But of course sometimes much better than others. Just when his father came here he declined, he was in 2nd grade. That’s when he declined. He was distracted and I had to get him a psychologist. He was distracted and would get behind on things.

School officials including teachers, administrators and educational specialists provided significant assistance and support during this precarious time in Francisco’s education in both formal and informal ways. Estela recalls the professional support that they set up for Fernando:

In Colombia I was always had an eye on my son and the teachers knew about the situation. My son was in 2nd, 3rd, 4th so in 3rd grade he had a short time where he was like so-so. So I had to go talk to the teacher several times and have him see a psychologist and all that. So in 3rd and 4th and part of 5th the teachers knew that my son didn’t have his father, that his father had left and the whole situation. So they would help me and they knew and I stayed in touch with them.

She also remembers the informal ways in which they lessened the burden on her family during this uncertain time:

The principal knew, I had shared it with him, the teacher knew they even said to me that it wasn’t problem if I didn’t buy him all the school supplies because it was a very long list of school supplies. You know that over there you have to pay for everything, here you don’t but over there you have to pay and buy uniforms. I only bought him pants and I bought him notebooks but not books, no. The principal even provided me with books and I photocopied them so that my son could study out of those. And they knew that my son was going to be there, that I would tell them when we had to leave. And do you know how long he was there, we came on the 28th of March and he was in school until the 21st of March only 8 days earlier. I thought it was more stressful that my son be at home while we
were preparing to leave, debating “Yes we’re going or no I don’t want to, yes I want to.” No, no, no I decided to make the most of it until the end so my son would be studying the whole time.

Estela decided to emigrate with her children in light of the approaching expiry of her Visitor’s VISA and Fernando’s desire to see his children again.

5.5 Post-Migration

Estela, Francisco and Alicia arrived in Canada via a safe house in Buffalo, New York in April of 2008. Their cases were added to Fernando’s asylum seeking case which caused a delay in the delivery of the decision on their refugee claim. The early days of the family’s reunification were stressful for both Estela and Fernando. Fernando felt the pressure of having to provide for his family financially while adjusting to living with his family again after a long period of separation. While they were in Colombia he provided financial support through remittances but when they arrived he had to readjust to being emotionally, physically and financially supportive to his wife and children while adjusting to family life again and performing at work. Fernando describes the challenges that he faced during this time:

When my family arrived I was very unsettled, very uncertain. It’s not the same to provide for 1 then for 4. It’s what I know how to do, I have done it my whole life but it had been a while that I hadn’t done it with them there. I mean it’s not the same to send them money then to have them here and manage this is for this and this is for that and be making the decisions. And sometimes Estela didn’t agree with my decisions and she had spent 3 years making the decisions and the children did not approve of my decisions either.

Estela was very affected by home sickness and their difficult living situation with Fernando’s father. She explains:

We spent 1 month living with my father-in-law in this apartment. Horrible. Horrible. Because we were stuck over there in that bedroom. All of use stuffed in there with all
our things. I didn’t like it at all, not because we have a bad relationship with him because simple because I was sad, I didn’t feel well. We couldn’t go out, sit out here and eat. He kept to himself, a 70 something year old man with his ideas and saying prayers and things. I preferred to stay out of the way or I would try, something that I tried at the beginning, was to go out and see things.

The children also had a hard time settling in and they would express their concerns to Estela. She describes them:

My children would say to me “Mom, why did we come here, it’s not nice here, I want to go to Colombia,” especially my son at the beginning. And my daughter too, “Mom, you tricked me.” “But why?” “You said that we were only coming on a trip.” “No, love, I didn’t say that.” “Yes, mommy, I didn’t think that we had to stay here. I want to go to where my grandmother and my uncles are.”

Estela was also especially concerned with ensuring Francisco and Alicia’s schooling and academic performance was not interrupted:

What worried me was that as soon as we arrived we had to find good school that my son could continue like in the same thing, that I wouldn’t lose him, I mean lose the path that he was on with his education over there… Yes. That my son wouldn’t go there to go down but instead to stay with the same rhythm…And I wanted my son to continue with the same thing, that he wouldn’t get off track but stay on it. I thought about the education of my son and the education of my daughter all the time.

After a short wait, Fernando and Estela were able to contact a school that they had located in their neighborhood and begin the process of enrolling their children. The school provided support from a Spanish-speaking parent volunteer, Cindy, who helped them with the registration process. In addition to this initial support Cindy took a special interest in the family, she soon developed a personal relationship with the family and supported them in navigating the school system as well as providing practical support with other needs. Estela describes her actions of care and concern:
She helped us in that moment and since she was at school all the time through my son she was always checking in on me. I remember that my son would always say “Mommy, Cindy says “Hi”. I saw Cindy at recess.” He would see her there and she would ask him how he was and if there was anything he needed.

So later she invited us one day to her house, so kindly. One day we needed, no we had an appointment with the social worker and we didn’t know who to ask… So in talking with her, I don’t know why I talked to her about that or Fernando had an idea and told me why don’t we ask her for a favor. And so that time I remember that she accompanied us to see the social worker. She said it was her pleasure, that she could come with us. She took us; she stayed with us and helped us. I remember that she spoke with us for everything, for a grant to help buy milk for the children, to get a computer she helped us get one for my son.

Eventually, Cindy’s kids graduated from the elementary school and she stopped volunteering there but Francisco and Elena continued to seek her support on school matters.

Francisco had a smooth transition into school thanks to the help of his teacher and classmates. He recalls some of his fears on the first day of school and how they were soon dissipated:

When I first started, most of, none of the children spoke Spanish and since I didn’t speak anything the teacher asked who would want to help me and everyone put up their hand to volunteer. And they helped me, that day I went out to recess and I thought I would be all by myself out there but they included me in their group.

The Suarez-Madarriaga family also found support in the Spanish-speaking SEPT worker assigned to the school. They were introduced to Paulina by another Spanish-speaking parent at a kindergarten orientation event for their daughter. They were unsure of her role in the school but she provided them with her contact information should they require
any assistance. It was not until first term report cards were distributed and parent-teacher interviews scheduled that they approached her for help. Estela remembers this encounter:

She was with other people and we saw her. She told us that she was there as a translator for other parents that needed support. She told use that she could help us too and it was already very late, like 8:00 PM. She told us that it wasn’t a problem and she so kindly helped us.

After initially acting as a translator in Parent-Teacher interviews, Fernando and Estela relied on her for help with other issues regarding the school and its services, their children and the family’s well being in general. She provided advice on applying for the child tax credit, helped them understand documents and processes in their immigration proceedings, provided complimentary passes to local attractions and provided advice on securing stable employment and labor regulations.

The family’s relationships with these 2 individuals and the support they provided were very important to their early adjustment to the school system. It was especially important since both parents feel that there are barriers to their interaction with the school otherwise. Estela feels that her knowledge of the policies that govern school decisions are limited especially in regards to what happens in the classroom and homework. She explains:

Well my son tells me all the time, “They made us change seats”, that he is in another spot that they sat him with other students and the like. But I don’t know what the policies are that they follow to make the changes. What makes the teacher change that child with that one, I don’t know what they think what drives them to make the changes.

As a result of her limited familiarity with the school system, she relies on Francisco to communicate these nuances of the schooling experience to her.

And he says to me “Mommy, my other classmates do have projects to do but since I am in ESL I don’t get everything because I am in ESL. But in other subjects they do assign homework but they haven’t assigned them to me yet
because I am in ESL, they don’t give me any of that.” So I am convinced and I say to myself, “Oh it must be like that.” But most of the time he says to me, “Mommy, the thing is they don’t give homework here.” “Mommy, the thing is,” he was telling me “here studies are more like laid back” that’s what he tells me.

Estela has questions about her son’s progress especially regarding the English language support he receives. She goes to Francisco to obtain this information.

For example I’ve said to him, “Honey, when will you be in ESL until”.
“Mommy, I don’t know.” I think, I think until this year they won’t put him in ESL, I don’t know.

During the final term Parent-Teacher interviews with Francisco’s teacher were postponed because of personal situation the teacher faced. Unfortunately, the interviews were never rescheduled and Fernando had to rely on information passed on from Francisco. However, his preference would have been to engage in communication with school

It’s not the same for your child to come home saying, “Mommy, I did well, I did well” and giggling here and “I want this and that and this is that toy that I want”, do you know what I mean? I don’t like that, I think that it’s necessary to be told whether you child did well in this, didn’t do so well in this, he needs to work on this. Although, this can be said in writing and you understand what they did in English and what you don’t understand you can pick up a dictionary and I did a lot of that. And I read his marks and in the numbers and you see, the numbers say a lot but you don’t feel satisfied with that. I see the improvement yes, but I want, there is supposed to be a teacher that is there and she is how you say caring, he is under her care and she should report to the parent I think.

The language barrier between the parents and the school is the greatest challenge to communication between home and school. Francisco has noticed this particular obstacle for his parents:
It seems like my dad and mom don’t speak to the teacher much because they are I don’t know since they don’t know much English then they like I don’t know don’t take the risk to talk to them too much.

Francisco had finished 4th Grade in Colombia and had begun the 5th grade before he emigrated because of the difference in school year calendars. When he arrived in Canada however, the school placed him back in 4th grade for the last 3 months of school. Due to the challenges with language and the novelty of the how the school system worked the

At the beginning of the year I thought that I was in 5th grade but then when I saw the sign on the classroom door I saw that it said 4th grade. I was like 4th grade? (laughs) What am I doing here? So I asked my mom and my mom asked my dad and my dad asked the principal. He said that it was because of my age I had to be there. In my class I am one of the oldest but in Colombia I was one of the youngest.

Elena understands that the language barrier is a significant one for here and identifies access to Spanish-language support as a potential solution. She explains:

Well maybe if there was more people who spoke my language available for example. Of course the barrier at all times is language but certainly, Daniela, if it wasn’t the language I would be more aware of, of my children at school how they are, how they are doing.

Francisco has had to act as a translator sometimes and he feels that it would take some pressure off of him for there to be language accessibility for his parents to the school. He gives the example of Parent-Teacher interviews where he has act as translator and how he feels:

I listen and translate what my mom and dad want to say to her. I feel weird like a bit like I don’t know too much, I don’t know if I’m saying things right.

Since Paulina has acted as a translator, however, Francisco feels differently about these interactions:
She is there so I didn’t have to do the translation but she did it…I can relax.

Elena has had more limited access to English language classes because of her role as the primary caregiver in her family. She describes her many attempts to pursue language classes:

I have tried to take advantage of studying a bit and have for short period of time, like 6 months maybe, a little bit but because of my daughter’s school since she is in kindergarten she gets out early from school and I don’t have anyone to watch her. So I have to be here. I go to school now where I am going I go for 2.5 hours only that’s all I can do so that then I can go pick up my daughter…So I had to stop studying for a long time, I wasn’t studying for a long time because I didn’t have anyone to care for my daughter and wherever I went they would always tell me this is the schedule, full day.

As a result Spanish-language translation is much more important to her because of her limited language skills. Fernando has more proficiency in English because of the time he spent in the United States and greater access to English language classes in Canada and the United States. As a result, when interactions with the school occur he is most likely to take the lead in these conversations. This highlights Estela’s challenging position since although she has more direct knowledge of the children’s development as the primary caregiver she is limited in her opportunity to share this with other key actors like school personnel. She describes her feelings during communication with the school that is mediated by her husband:

I’m ashamed to put my foot in my mouth and say something wrong, I’d rather stay quiet. I understand a lot of thing and once in a while I try to say some others but when you make me have a conversation with you, I can’t. So when I go to get their reports I feel, since I’m very inquisitive, I like to be in the know about what’s going on with my children, about how they are doing, what they are doing in other words about everything, yes, everything. And I have to get there and sit and listen and that’s it. And I say to Fernando, “Fernando, ask her this.” He says, “Oh no, no, no, I’ll ask in a bit”. So I just stay there, I want to know something
and I have to limit myself to what he tells me. So I don’t know I would like maybe if not Paulina then to use someone or for the school to facilitate more access to the teachers, even to be able to speak to them. But no, like I’m telling you I feel like a limit like a barrier that prevents you from going there and speaking.

This barrier was especially significant during a challenging incident for the family this year which highlighted Estela’s role as a parent who wants to advocate on behalf of her children. During this past school year Francisco brought a notebook he had bought in Colombia which had a photograph of a Colombian celebrity model in a swimsuit on the front. His classmates began to pass it around until the teacher caught them and Francisco was sent to the office. Fernando and Estela had to go to the school to speak with the principal about the incident. Elena describes her instinctive reaction to the situation:

So I said I have to go in representation of my son, I have to go as a mother, I have to go just as I am and stand up for him. Because I know that my son is not bad and the fact that a big deal was made of this because of a notebook he brought with a picture of a model, oh no.

Estela felt that her husband was not on the same page as her in regards to supporting their son and advocating for him. Unfortunately because of the language barrier her participation in the meeting was limited and she was frustrated with the result. She explains:

So the next day I wanted to say a lot of things but Fernando was more on the lady’s side. So Fernando was like, “Oh yes, of course we have to be careful, we don’t see differently, the thing is he shouldn’t have done it.” In other words in that moment, our son didn’t feel support by his father but instead felt that he was opposing him. I wanted to give my point of view, defend my son. Because I knew that my son was a good child, not a bad child who was inciting other children like look, look, look at this women or do this or that. No. Instead he was simply saying look this, this is, I like beautiful women, look she is beautiful, I like her.
This incident also highlights the difference in cultural norms between Colombian society and Canadian society. This becomes evident as Elena shares the incident with her family in Colombia:

So I told my mom and my brothers and they said, “Such a big deal and so much trouble for on little thing. And what about what one sees over there the things that are said, the things that you see in public and students who do and undo themselves in the street who take drugs and all sorts of things. Older students who do horrible things and such a big deal gets made because you see a child with this notebook that you see here all the time.”

Although in this incident Fernando and Estela disagreed about how to advocate for Francisco, at different times they have both approached the school in the best interests of their children. Fernando recounts an incident with his daughter and a kindergarten classmate. This classmate was exchanging food with Alicia on a number of occasions against her wishes and Fernando was concerned and made his way to the school to inform the teacher and also ask for her support. He recalls the conversation:

I told her I don’t like this and that, this little girl we don’t have anything against her, she is a Cuban little girl. We don’t have anything against here but this girl has too much power and gets Alicia and overpowers her and she tells here do this, don’t do that, give me this and so we don’t want that to happen. So she said that she was going to sit them separately when eating, when they had snack time she was going to sit them apart and that she is not allowed to exchange any food because there are allergies and because many people don’t like it.

The teacher understood the concerns that Fernando had and was supportive in finding a solution that would address the issues. Fernando was appreciative of this and spoke very highly of this teacher. Fernando felt that a lot of this student’s behavior was related to the different view of education that the family had even though they were also Latin American. He explains his concerns with this classmate’s influence and the difference in education that he notices:
We don’t feel good with our daughter being at their house because of their education because education in Cuba, their education can be very good, they say it’s the best education in the world, that’s what I’ve heard. But honestly it doesn’t seem like it because all the Cubans I know I see them complain, complain, complain and they use vulgar language and stuff. So I ask, where is their education?

Another aspect of the home-school relationship that Estela and Fernando mentioned is the environment or attitude of the school. Estela notes that while initially her interaction with the school was not positive in feeling, she has noted an improvement in responses to her presence at the school. She speaks specifically about her interactions with administrative personnel:

I think that at the school they know us now, we get there and the lady sees us and smiles like saying here comes this lady. Because a couple of times I had to go, I don’t like for my son to miss school but when I have to go to medical appointments or whatever then I have to get my son before school’s out…That is well a good thing that the lady knows me and has become more kind because she was more serious and now she is more kind.

Estela also noted the difference between the tone of the relationship between schools and parents in Colombia versus in Canada. She describes the Colombian context:

I could count on the teachers also, like I told you they would become good friends with the parents. There was a nice relationship. No not like with so much formality maybe like you live, that I have had to live here with my son instead you felt more at ease.

Fernando and Estela have had some challenging situations in their interactions with the school which have highlighted this formality or bureaucracy in the relationship. In one particularly challenging incident, Fernando and Elena requested that that school informed them that if they wanted this transportation service they would have to transfer schools to one that covered the area where they lived. Having recently settled into their new home
and school Elena and Francisco did not receive this a welcome suggestion. Elena explains:

They are adapted to one thing how bad for me to take them out of there like the lady said to me, “If you want transportation take them out of here and put them in another school.” And I said, “No, that is not the solution.” For her it was the solution, but I feel good like this, I want my children to be here, I like it here and I want them to remain here. After having my son for 6 months in that school I’m not going to take him out just because, no I want him to continue here.

This situation was further complicated by the tone and attitude of the interactions with both school personnel and the individuals responsible for transportation. Fernando comments on the challenges to resolving this difficult situation given the tone of the interaction:

When we asked that the children be dropped off not there around the corner on [Street Name] but instead be dropped off at the corner they said no and they didn’t do it up until the very end. After we asked her to see if she could help us out with transportation for our daughter nearer to here, she would say that there wasn’t transportation for this neighbourhood because this block belongs to another school up here that is another Catholic school. We would have to change schools. She told us and the secretary told us first. But now the secretary has improved now she sees us and she helps us but they were was a time when you have to look for another school was all she told us.

Paulina, the school settlement worker was able to help them resolve this challenge, however, it was a long process wherein Fernando had to insist repeatedly despite not being received courteously. He explains:

That this couldn’t be done that’s what the lady said about that and you could see on her face like the negligence towards you…So Paulina filled out a letter for us and instead of sending it I took it and gave to her. Then nothing, no response, nothing. So they told me to go and ask and it wasn’t until the very end that they
called me from the school that that bus could take her, the secretary called me. So I think that it’s because one insisted and insisted but I think that that girl, that girl is like negligent.

Despite these challenging experiences collaboration between home and school is very important to Fernando and Elena. They see it as being a key factor in their children’s success. Fernando states:

Well, I think that [education] is what you’ve been taught and what you’ve heard in school. That it is a complementary thing as much from school as from home. Between, between the 2 sides. Nothing is gained by a good teacher if the parents are neglectful or the parents very, very concerned about everything and a poor teacher or something. So it has to be aligned…And I think that it has to be from both sides. That we have to teach them as much to be good people and good students and the same at school.

Elena believes her role as a parent in this partnership is very important regardless of the barriers that exist:

Yes, it seems to me like an important role, fundamental, because if it’s not like that parents are the ones who know their children best and facilitate that process. Many times we limit ourselves, the parents, and I think we don’t have the knowledge and we don’t know how to reach them more with what type of methods, with what information, what kind of, of things to do with them to like improve.

Estela also offers ideas about practices that would support her as new immigrant parent and mitigate some of these limitations:

I would like to learn, it would be so great to have some key points about education that one could say well during this stage my son or daughter is learning to read and I can help with this…My daughter has to learn to read in Spanish as well as English and since I know zero English vocabulary and more or less bits of words and I know how to translate a few things but she can’t say to me, “Mommy
can you read me this story in English” and I start to read it any way I can and she is correcting me “Mommy, you don’t say it like that, you don’t say it that way” without her even knowing how to read she is correcting me. So I say to myself, how am I going to teach her haphazardly, teach her the wrong things, no, I would rather not. What I am doing it’s what the mother of this other girl is doing and I’m going to do it, to write on little cards, for example, “door”, “chair”, “television”, “computer” so that she can learn but both in English and Spanish I remember that this was a method in Colombia.

Elena and Fernando both place a very high value on education both for personal growth and practical professional possibilities. Elena explains how important education is at an individual level:

A person without education no no they’re not worth anything, not worth anything because education is basic to everything. Even for a person who is at home all day doing housework in the kitchen all day needs to know, needs to be how do you say current. In other words I believe that education is basic, it’s fundamental during the first year of life and later you should continue because otherwise, otherwise well education just dies, it becomes dormant. For example every day you have to improve and do everything that you learned and everyday you learn something different and everything there is to learn is welcome. I mean there is nothing that you can say no this doesn’t benefit me, these are things, experiences so a person especially a young person should make the most of it…education is what you are most grateful for in life.

They communicate these values of education to their children by sharing their personal experiences with education and the value it has for them and potentially for their children. Elena states:

I say to my son and daughter, the best time of my life was as a student. In other words, enjoy every moment, live every moment, don’t waste time, share and participate. I mean life is learning, a new experience, beautiful things, good things.
Fernando explains how he shares the value of education with his son by drawing on his own experiences and the hardship that his family has endured:

I tell Francisco to smarten up and study because it’s very important, because by studying you can get good jobs and no just feel like you’re the strongest mule to carry the load...So that he can get a job where he won’t have to kill himself, where he won’t have to work like a slave. Well he knows and has seen that I’m well and not well. He has had to see the sufferings of our family, the sufferings related to money. They both have seen all of this and so I think that that later on their studies should not fail. I like what I am doing, I know that I am receiving a paycheque and that I have money for the rent and everything but that is where one sees where education is lacking. And my father didn’t need me to work and he had enough to pay for my studies and we have everything but I didn’t value that.

Francisco echoes Fernando and Estela’s view of the purpose of education as a resource for social mobility into the middle class through the acquisition of a well paying job when asked what he thinks the purpose of education is:

To, to learn so that later when you are grown you can have a good job.

Fernando has also expressed these same values to his mother on different occasions saying:

“Mommy when I am grown I want, I don’t want to have problems, because sometimes we say, Mommy let’s go here, we get there and we don’t have any money to spend. Oh Mommy, when I grow up I want to have money and I don’t want to stress over things. I want to have money so I can have my car, my house and I can go out wherever I want,” he says to me. “Honey, that’s why you have to study so you can have a good job, study and be wise and you’ll see that it will be better for you.”

Fernando and Estela view education as a combination of academic knowledge useful for career pursuits combined with a strong moral and ethical foundation. They believe this combination produces valuable members of society and the kind of people that they
would like their children to be. Fernando, Estela and their family have great hopes for the future. Francisco is interested in being an archeologist. Although his father has reservations about the overseas travel this might require, his parents are supportive of his goal. The family believes that they must all work together towards their goals, support one another and not pull in their individual directions. Fernando and Estela want the best for their children and feel that they can provide this through being good examples and surrounding their children with people who can reinforce their moral values and encouraging them to shape their futures in line with their parents’ values and principles.
Chapter 6
Ventura-Cruz Family

Elena Cruz and Ernesto Ventura and their 2 sons Ernesto Jr. and Juan live in Mississauga. I met them at a networking event for Ecuadorian professionals hosted by the Ecuadorian Consulate in Toronto. Elena through her work at Toronto Dominion Bank was a one of the organizers of the event and provided the keynote speaker for the event. Her husband, Ernesto, was also in attendance. I spoke to him first after introducing myself briefly during the networking presentations. He told me he was interested in the topic of the study and fit the demographic of the participant sample. He also said his family was very busy but that he would talk to his wife about participating. I shared the recruitment materials with him and he said that he would talk it over with his wife and contact me.

A few weeks passed before Ernesto contacted me. It was difficult at first to find a suitable time and place to meet as he was going through a busy period at his job. After a couple of attempts, we finally met up on a weekday evening at coffee shop near his home. He arrived first and I spotted him easily at a table near the window at the far end of the restaurant. Our families had a lot in common having emigrated from the same city in Ecuador. After that initial interview, I met up with his 2 sons on a Friday morning in their home in a west-end suburb. Their parents were not home that morning so I was able to interview both boys in their home. The following Sunday afternoon, all the members of the family were available so we met to do the focus group at their home. Ernesto Jr. had to leave to go to his part-time job so we completed the focus group before he had to go. Immediately after I completed Elena’s individual interview concluding the data collection process.

6.1 Ernesto

At the time of his interview Ernest was 42 years old. Ernesto was born in the capital city of Quito, Ecuador. He had an early introduction to life in Canada while he was in 2nd grade when he and his mother came to visit his sister who had migrated previously. They had planned to stay and Ernesto began attending school but things did not work out and
he ended up returning to Ecuador with his mother. That initial experience was a significant part of his childhood and influenced his views of schooling. He explains how these ideas followed him into adult life:

And the idea always stayed with me that it was a pleasant environment especially where my sister lived in Orillia because it was small. So I was attracted to the idea of that way of life. The school close to home which is one of the greatest strengths that this educational system has, the school close by or as part of the neighbourhood right? That is the most powerful and I think it should continue to be developed and strengthened.

After returning to Ecuador, Ernesto completed the rest of his schooling at a bilingual private school in Quito. He recalls that he was an above average student even when he was not at his best:

I think that in elementary school I was a good student, I was always among the best in my class. In secondary school, I would say that I was still above average, yes. When you grow up you, you focus a bit more on having fun. But until later, in my case, you do re-evaluate and say no I think that I better study.

Ernesto went on to study Computer and Systems Engineering at Escuela Politecnica Nacional (National Polytechnic School) which he chose because of its rigor and prestige. He explains his decision which was supported by his parents:

So that’s why I chose it, that was one of the reasons for my parents choosing the Polytechnic because it was always one of the ones that you heard was more of a challenge, right. I mean it was, I mean there was more of a point in graduating from there then from another university.

6.2 Elena

Elena has just turned 39 at the time her interview was conducted. She was also born in Quito, Ecuador and completed most of her schooling there. She studied in Catholic Private Schools run by nuns both for elementary and secondary school. For elementary
and part of secondary school she studied at a very strict and traditional school. She recalls her early schooling:

La Providencia was a school that was extremely old fashioned, right, nuns that were from the age of [laughs] so completely hardened I mean that type of education. I remember that my classmates, a classmate… I remember she wore little braids and she would hit her for not doing, for not doing something or I don’t know what she did, she would throw her against the chalkboard, they would hit her in that way, those kind of nuns. Very old fashioned. So from that school I only remember that hitting, yelling things like that. My teacher, I remember that my typing teacher and I always tell my children that they are lucky that they have very modern teachers, because my typing teacher at that time I don’t know if you remember the little typewriters, she would make us put a little cloth over to cover the keys and so sometimes we would uncover it and so one time I uncovered the keyboard and she had these longs nails out to here and SLASH she grabbed my hand and she scratched me like that. I never uncovered the keyboard again. I mean it was the type of education based on fear. I mean that kind of education based on fear can you imagine? I was always a good student since I was a little girl so I didn’t suffer too much but that is what I remember about that school.

After that school, at her father's bequest she transferred to a very elite Catholic school for girls in the 3rd year\(^5\) of her secondary studies. Her experiences at this school were very different as she recounts:

He transferred me to a school that is called Hogal, Hogar Colegio La Dolorosa. He would say, “Oh no, I have always wanted my daughter,” I am the only daughter, “I want my daughter to study there.” It was a school for society girls, fancy schmancy, all showing of and he would see them, “The girls are so beautiful,” he would say “That’s where my daughter has to be” and he transferred

\(^5\) In Ecuador elementary school extends from Kindergarten to Grade 6. Secondary school begins in the 7th year of schooling. Elena transferred schools in her 9th year of schooling.
me. It was a very expensive school, I don’t know if you know it. At that time it was a very expensive school. It was so expensive that I don’t know I think 60% of my father’s income went to that school to pay for my studies. So then I went into 3rd year from 3rd year until 6th year. It was a bilingual school so that was good. So they taught us certain subjects in English. I mean the subject was in English. I had an excellent experience at that school there. The friends I still have are from there, from that time at that school. That’s where I made friends and the memories that I mostly have are from there. [At this school] rather there were Colombian nuns, much more modern, more new, more contemporary so they would host parties and everything and the boys were there I mean these were nuns that were completely different than the other ones. And those are the things that I remember as the beauty of my primary education, high school.

After competing her secondary studies Elena went on to study at the Escuela Politecnica Nacional. She recalls that she entered a very male-dominated field and her experience as a woman was quite challenging.

Then in University, unfortunately the university where I went was a men’s university, particularly at that time most of the engineering students or programs like that were men, the Polytechnic was a university made up 99% men. My experience was difficult initially in first year because we were 3 women in a class of about 50 men. So you would climb the stairs to get to class and all the men would look you up and down it was a horrible feeling. So that was foul, the professors were completely chauvinistic at that time, many of them. So I remember a professor that would say to us when we just began to study, in first year, “How many women do we have? 3? I don’t know what you are doing here. Women should be in the kitchen and if you pass with me,” he was a chemistry professor, “If you pass with me it will be a miracle. So assume you will fail the semes, the course if you are women.”

The sexist environment made the very competitive year even more challenging for Elena. Since there were no entrance exams for university a greater proportion of students were
admitted and consequently the professors and administration were determined to weed out those who could not perform to the standards they set. After that first year of trial by fire the conditions of Elena's post-secondary education improved dramatically and she went on to graduate successfully from university and complete a Master's Degree at the University of Monterrey in Mexico. While at University, she met her husband and they were shortly married after completing their studies.

Elena's parents were both supportive of her educational goals. Her father was very involved in her education from selecting the secondary school she would attend to supporting her during post-secondary studies. While her mother provided moral and emotional support for her daughter's ambitious dreams. She describes their participation in her student experience:

And my parents also supported me, especially my father he was always with me during my education. He was always concerned about how it was going for me. I remember he supported me a lot in a subject that he know a lot about it was um, analytical geometry. He, because of what he did for a living he know the subject very well so he would explain what he could explain, he explained a lot to me. With the rest of the subjects I would say that I didn’t ask for too much help. I wasn’t a child who went around asking help from her parents in general. I did it on my own. Um, but in this subject in particular he liked to explain it to me and it was also a bit complex … Yes, so in university we also shared that subject a little and we also took plane geometry so he would explain that…And my mother, she was always around, not very close to what I was doing in my studies but instead encouraging me not to go into the kitchen. That’s what I remember, I would say she spoiled me because she would say, “Don’t go in the kitchen, not even to wash one dish, don’t do absolutely anything because you have to be sitting with your books.” So she spoiled me in that sense and I didn’t know how to do anything but study. So because she would say, “No no no I’ll do everything, I’ll do this that, I’ll do everything because you have study.” So she, on the other hand, always helping when my friends from university came over, offering them food, motherly things. So I always had their support.
6.3 Pre-Migration

Ernesto and Elena settled into professional life in their respective careers easily because of their strong educational background as well as the networks they had developed attending a well-recognized university. After some time their family grew with the addition of their two boys and school re-emerged as a familiar theme.

Their oldest son, Ernest Jr., began his schooling at a prestigious private school which his father describes as “Montessori-like”. Ernesto and Elena, however, felt that this school was not the right fit for their son. Ernest describes the mismatch between what the school provided and his son’s personality:

It wasn’t for our oldest son. He didn’t have the personality. I wouldn’t say it was a disaster but it wasn’t good. Because he needed, in our point of view, more shape, more more structure.

Estela explains the concerns that they had with their son’s experience especially as they conflicted with their own values and expectations of they type of education they wanted for their son:

So he was there like 3 or 4 years and then we saw that he wasn’t learning anything, not even how to write. I mean he learned to write but, we would say to him, “Ernestito, do your homework” and he would say, “No I finished them”. So he would do a few things, standing up he wouldn’t even sit to study or do his homework and he sort of did it standing up bam bam bam and I’m finished. His penmanship was a disaster; he didn’t know how to speak either language [laughs]. I was frustrated…So it was a type of education completely against our own training. We endured for 3 years, or 4, in a way to see whether it worked, to see what Ernesto Jr. demonstrates but I sincerely didn’t see him demonstrate any tendency towards anything to speak about like suddenly he loved reading. I didn’t see a tendency so I thought we have to put him on some sort of path.
In addition to their concerns about the curriculum and pedagogy at Ernesto Jr.'s first school, his parents also had concerns about what they saw as the social and moral climate of the institution. Elena explains these concerns:

First the class of people, it was very high class, the highest economic class, so we went through a bit of frustrating experience because Ernesto Jr. began to change his way of thinking and speaking. That is to say he began to ask us questions that were completely out of line like for example, I remember, he would say to me, “Mom, how much do you have in your bank accounts, how much money do you have in your accounts?” And I would ask him why, “Because my friend’s mom has like 1 million dollars in her accounts”. Things like that. He would only speak about money. So, [laughs] can you imagine a 1st or 2nd grade child talking about money all the time and that my friend has a country house and what do we have and what does my grandfather have. Things like that. So we were like maybe the education was the best education that the kids could have there because of the English and everything, but something was, there was something happening here.

First, it was that it wasn’t Catholic or Christian [school] so you could have any religion and this and that so it went again all of our values sincerely.

In the end, Ernesto Jr. was enrolled into another private school in the city which his parents felt aligned more with what he needed and their values of education. Elena describes how the new school was a better fit:

So we changed him to the SEC that was a Catholic school, where they wore uniforms, completely opposite to the looseness of the other one. So that’s where he did his 2 years where they put many, many rules on him. It was good so that school left me with a much better taste in my mouth.

The prerogative to choose a school for their children that they felt met the needs of their child and family both academically and morally was a significant part of their role as parents in the education of their children. Elena describes the importance of this aspect of her role:
More than anything that the school where he is fits with what we are looking for as a family. In fact in the first experience we had, maybe it was the best school and we wanted the best for him, all bilingual and everything so we put him there but nevertheless it didn’t fit morally what we wanted for him, we would lose that. So, our role was one more of support and understanding to see if where he is being educated fulfils more or less with what we want, what we are seeking for them. So in this particular case it didn’t fulfil those things so we made the decision to change him.

Ernesto clarifies the nuances of school choice for parents within the different contexts of the Ecuadorian and Canadian system:

Having the school close to home which is one of the strengths that this educational system has, the school close to or as part of the neighbourhood which I think is the most effective and should continue and be developed which is on the other hand comparatively speaking the difference in Ecuador. Everyone over there or most people try to choose where they will study, here it’s different, you pick the neighbourhood and the neighbourhood matches with a school. Over there, on the other had, you live wherever you want and depending on the resources that you have you pick the school. It can take you between 5 minutes to hours to get to and from school. It’s much more efficient in the sense that the child or young person, more so the child especially when they’re young, my children have to travel 2 or 3 minutes to school so they get there fresh and calm, motivated and not thinking about going home. In Ecuador on the other hand it took us 40, 45 minutes to go to school on the best of days with traffic and everything. So it’s a big change.

In addition to the difference in the school selection process, Ernesto commented on the relationship between schools and parents in his home country. He describes his experiences as a parent and some of the functions that this role included:

Well, ah, I would say that the relationship between parents and the school in Ecuador basically is not very strong. Rather, as long as you fulfil your duties with
the school, there is very little contact I would say between the school and parents. Except for the events on Father’s Day and Mother’s Day, Christmas, but there is very little contact. Perhaps in elementary school more so but um, um no, there is very little contact I mean you get the report cards, acceptable evaluations and the rest doesn’t really matter.

He feels that any participation outside of these required and defined boundaries are a result of a shift in the style and type of parenting that comes with a higher degree of education and the socioeconomic position of the school and its student population especially in contrast to previous generations of parents, like his own.

Well in our case it was a bit different because you are let’s say a little bit more educated, you have a bit more, um, at least you say to yourself our relationship is going to be a little bit more focussed on the children. And our interest was much more participatory I would say, talking with the teachers. The calibre of the schools that they went to were also the best level, the best kind. The type of expectations from the teachers there are a little bit more I mean interviews, I mean it is a bit more personalized attention.

In reflecting on more non-conventional and unstructured modes of home-school interaction, Ernesto notes the feeling of openness and accessibility that he had in approaching the school in Ecuador:

So I would say that it was much more open, I mean you go any day and you know this is important, I want to talk about it now and obviously and they would make time for you.

6.4 Migration

The Ventura-Cruz family’s experience of migration was a unique one for a number of reasons. They migrated to Canada in 2002, a time when the migration of professionals from the global south and particularly South America continued to increase. Since the 1990s, immigrants from Latin America have entered Canada under the Independent and Family class categories (Recalde, 2002). These immigrants are increasingly highly
educated professionals from a number of source countries (Veronis, 2006). As with previous waves, the interaction between Canadian policy and conditions in the sending nation facilitated the migratory paths. Canada’s policy to attract highly trained professionals coincided with disparate conditions in Latin America and produced many of the candidates of this wave (Ginieniewicz, 2007; Darden and Kamel, 2000). As well-established professionals in their home country, their experience of migration developed very differently than those groups of migrants who had arrived in earlier waves. Since Ernesto’s sister lived in Canada during his childhood and adulthood and as a consequence Ernesto was exposed to Canadian life and culture long before deciding to migrate here. Finally, the process of migration for the Ventura-Cruz family was one that had them living as a transnational family for a period of time. Beginning in the early 90s Ernesto, Elena and their children obtained Permanent Resident documentation in Canada. In order to maintain this status they vacationed in Canada regularly but eventually lost their Residency because of the long periods spent outside of Canada. They were not overly concerned, as they felt financially and socially stable in their home country. In 2000, however, the situation changed as Ecuador underwent a financial crisis which included the bankruptcy of a number of banks including the one where Elena worked. The Ventura-Cruz’s feared that the conditions in Ecuador could become as dire as those in Argentina also in crisis during the same period. It was during this time that they looked to Canada as an alternative. They re-applied for Permanent Residency and Elena seriously doubted that they would be re-approved after having lost their status previously. It was 2 years before they received a response but in 2002, they were approved again as Permanent Residents of Canada. The financial crisis was just ending at this point and both Elena and Ernesto were comfortable and successful in their careers. Nevertheless, they quit their jobs and began the process of moving their family. One of the major motivating reasons for their decisions to migrate was in order to provide their children with the opportunity for what they labeled as a “world-class international education” while at the same time removing from them the burden of a country in crisis and a political climate that was not improving. In June 2002, Ernesto and the 2 children moved to Canada. Elena stayed back to sell their home and many of their belongings. She continued on at her job as the Vice-President of a very prominent bank. Her boss
allowed her to work out a schedule whereby for 6 months she would live half of each month in Ecuador and half in Canada. Her boss also offered her this arrangement because he feared she would not stay in Canada when faced with the challenges of settling in a new country. Elena remembers his words:

Elena you’re not going to live in Canada. Why? Because you’re going to see how hard it is, they’re not going to recognize your studies, they’re not going to be valued, you’re going to feel frustrated at seeing yourself. Here in Ecuador people open doors when they see you, they open doors for you, everyone knows they, they’re opening doors, after you Ma’am and you’re going to get there and you are going to feel frustrated at being a nobody and you will come back.

Elena accepted the offer and lived transnationally for 3 months. In September of 2002 she decided to move permanently with the rest of her family with Canada particularly because she felt that she needed to be around to support her children as they transitioned into the new school system. Although, Ernesto’s family was in Canada, Elena felt that she needed to be the one caring for her children as they adjusted to their new life. She explains the process that took place:

In September since the kids were starting school here, I said, it seems like I can’t continue on in the same way. I can’t because of the children, because there wasn’t anyone for them. I would have been leaving them in the hands of my mother in law, their first, the first day which is the most difficult, the first month which was so frustrating for me. So I said, no, I have to be with them during these challenging times and so I decided to resign completely.

Another challenge in the process of migration and settlement for the Ventura-Cruz family was the differing expectations that they had among themselves of what the migration process would be like as well the difference of these expectations from those around them who had already gone through the process. Estela explains the tension between her expectations and those of Ernesto’s family:
Ernesto had family here in Canada, a lot of family. Not close family but well his Mother who is close but the rest were cousins, a little more distant. They, this family were from the migratory movements 30 years ago, they a kind, different kind of migration, that didn’t understand the migration of professionals at all. They had come 30 years ago when they were given a tract of land, different thing, when they had to work in whatever job they could find. Toronto wasn’t like it is today. It was a totally different situation. They didn’t understand professional migration so they weren’t a great help. The advice of these people who were older than us was completely misaligned with our, with what we were looking for. I remember that one of them told us, you have to go work in janitorial services in this and than. Even my mother in law mentioned that because she lived in a world where many of her Hispanic friends, older men and women worked in that area.

In addition to this the expectations and Elena and Ernest were also not in synch and this caused tension in their marriage. Both Ernesto and Elena describe this time as one in which they were not cooperating as a team. Ernesto especially highlights how he views the family as a team that needs to cooperate in order to be successful during the tumultuous time of migration. He states:

A family, in changing locations is a team too. You were educated, were born in this environment but when you change countries what you were before it disappears, you are an unknown in a new land. You don’t have the support of yours parents, your friends to find work, you don’t know anything. You don’t have anyone to leave your kids with because you don’t know anyone. Over there on the other hand it was easy. You call a friend or even a cousin for a day to leave your kids so that you can run errands here it is totally different. So, if the team that is that family doesn’t work, doesn’t function well with the 2 main players being the spouses in our case it didn’t function then there isn’t a team.

Elena also recalls the way that both she and her husband worked separately in their own directions as first until they came to the realization that they had to work as a team:
It was a very hard time that first year; it was, let’s say the first year we didn’t work as a team with Ernesto. We didn’t align, I complained a lot about having to come so we didn’t work as a team and so we lost that first year. I would say the first and second year. The second year each one of us decided to forge ahead on our own way but we didn’t work as a team and I would say that perhaps was my fault because I regretted coming here. So, um, after the second year I somewhat settled, actually I conceded and so ah like a light bulb went off and I said at about a year and a half I saw the light and I said no no no I am not going to lose here, what’s happening to me, I am not a loser, I am going to build my life and I started rebuilding.

6.5 Post-Migration

As the family settled into their new life in Canada, Ernesto and Elena began to develop in their respective career fields. Initially, they both were able to get entry level jobs in the technology field. Estela recalls:

Initially, Ernesto had, thank God, acquired a job in technology that was what allowed him to enter into the Canadians market and also helped me when I got here because I went to work with him since I have a degree in Technology too.

Ernesto continued to work as a private contractor for a technology firm and Elena acquired a position in a training and transition program at TD Bank that allowed her to break into her field. Ernesto Jr. and Juan began to attend the Catholic School in their neighbourhood. Ernesto Jr. Entered the 6th grade while Juan went into Junior Kindergarten.

As Ernesto Jr. settled into school he found it difficult to fit in and make friends. This was a difficult time for Ernesto Jr. but also for his mother as well as she remembers looking on those first isolating experiences. She remembers this time:

Ernesto Jr. when he started I was so sad, I would stay and watch from outside. Without him knowing, I would stay near the school like in the playground a little bit away to see how he would react the first 3 or 4 days. He was like 11 years old
so I was observing a lot of what was happening to him…I saw that he was completely alone, lost in the school playground without a single friend. Since he is let’s say a bit timid, I would say quiet it was even worse not speaking the language…when he was there he was an isolated entity and I would watch this completely isolated entity amidst all the others. None, no one approached him there were no teachers that would support him during recess, because what I saw was recess time, I didn’t see inside the school. So it didn’t matter to anyone, nothing, I mean no one did anything. No one engaged in a process, none of the teachers or the school had an integration process for new students into the school. I mean if I was a teacher maybe I would have had some kind of program where someone who speaks Italian or another language similar to the one the new student speaks would becomes friends with the new student, like a buddy system or something but nothing like that existed. He was simply a little lone person among 200 students or 100 students without a clue about what to do. That made me feel frustrated and angry at the system at the beginning and I would see him alone and lost and looking around the playground by himself for an hour. And I remember the first day he saw me there, he caught a glimpse of me watching him in the distance and he came up to me and with tears in his eyes he said “Mom I don’t want to come back here.”

Ernesto remembers the importance of the support that his mother provided for him during this time of adjustment to his new surroundings:

She, she was just like yeah it’s going to be fine, you’ll make friends, like, like just gave me support.  

Elena knew it was very difficult for Ernesto Jr. because she kept a close eye on him during those first few days. It wasn’t until Ernesto Jr. was much older that he shared with his mother how very difficult those early days were. Elena states:

6 The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.
He never said anything to me until not long ago, like 1 year ago he said to me, “Mom, you don’t know how frustrated I felt in the first year.” Not many months ago he said that to me. “It was the worst experience but I never wanted to tell you so that you wouldn’t suffer because you had your own suffering. I didn’t want you to suffer with all the suffering that I had and the bullying that I received from the others.” I think in one way or another they made fun of him in class because he didn’t speak the language. So that left a bad taste in my mouth for Canadian education, that they didn’t have a process to integrate foreigners into the context.

The transition into school for Juan was a bit easier because he was younger. His teacher spoke Italian and this made the transition to English for him smoother as his mother recalls:

Juan on the other hand I felt had an experience rather since he was just a child of 4 years old who was going into kindergarten all the children were crying that no, no, no they don’t want to leave their moms right. So he would cry non-stop obviously he didn’t understand anything that was being said. But thank God he had more luck because his teacher was Italian. So he would say when he came home, “My teacher speaks Spanish”. It was that she would speak to him in Italian so a lot of works sounded similar and he could understand. So I think that a lot of words he understood and she always addressed him in Spanish, in Italian. So he thought that she was speaking to him in Spanish since he didn’t have a clear idea of what Spanish was to him it was Spanish. So he was happy with his teacher and this made all the difference because he could understand everything the teacher said. Of course and when she spoke English he understood bit-by-bit and picked up English up naturally.

The Ventura-Cruz family were fortunate to connect with some key resource individuals that helped ease their transition into their new school. One of these people was the ESL teacher at Ernesto Jr. and Juan’s school. Elena recalls her as being particularly helpful to the family in adjusting to the school:
A woman, a teacher who was the one responsible for ESL who was Brazilian, she was excellent. She was an excellent person…She was always concerned and we had a good relationship with her and she helped us a lot when we got here especially at school she was always concerned about the 2 boys.

Elena also appreciated that this teacher communicated with her about her children’s experience and also made herself available for questions and concerns from the parents. Elena says that this teacher involved her by:

Keeping me up to speed, “Elena you know Juan is going to be doing this, Ernesto Jr. I’m noticing this about him”, and in that way keeping me informed. And she was that teacher to whom I got closest to, that is to day that I felt comfortable to talk to her and sincerely ask her how she saw them, what problems do you see in my children but unfortunately she wasn’t at the school for enough time to be able to perceive all that was going on.

Elena describes the factors that she believes set this teacher apart from others and allowed her to form a strong relationship with her as a parent:

That was the person that I knew, that I felt that she felt, knew what we were going through because the rest of the teachers, because she was the one that welcomed us because we were students of another language she was the assigned person to integrate students into the school. So she assessed them, registration everything she tested them and said no no no he speaks perfectly. She asked us a lot about ourselves about what we had, what we did in Ecuador. I mean she know a lot about us when we just arrived so we developed a relationship with her more than the other teachers. The teachers were just the teachers for that year and we didn’t have any real relationship I don’t know just strictly education. At the same time she was also with them for a few years. She knew Juan, Ernesto Jr. this and was concerned, how it’s going, are you ok in English or not etcetera. She would monitor, follow up until unfortunately they eliminated her position. That saddened me a lot, but what can you do.
As the family settled into the school system another key resource that helped them navigate within it was other parents within the school system. When it came to strategic course selection for Ernesto Jr. in secondary school his mother relied on the advice of another father within their cultural group and with a background in education. She recalls this experience:

I received advice from a friend, he’s a Hispanic teacher who is what do you call it the one who, he was the President of the Ecuadorian Association and I was the Director at the time, he was a teacher, the principal of St. Francis Xavier. Do you get it? I was very good friends with him, I was the director of that association and he was the president. So, I remember that I would ask his opinion and he would say he should take the Spanish credits and that would increase his marks to get into university. I practically followed his advice and I made him take Spanish for 2, 3, 2 years I think it was 3 and look that helped him because his marks were almost 100, 90 and bit and that helped him to be able to enter university. So it was an interesting experience.

Relationships with other parents are important to Elena and Ernesto and while shared cultural experience is helpful Elena notes that sometimes this can lead to negative experiences. She explains that what matters most when it comes to connection among parents in a similar approach to child-rearing:

We live in a very calm neighbourhood of families with children at more or less that same ages and so we didn’t have neighbourhood problems. I think that was good too because sometimes in Toronto there are dangerous areas and schools where there are too many Hispanics and sometimes the children get lost among so many Hispanics, they get lost because sometimes the more there are the more you tend towards bad things, right? On the other hand here there are more professional people, people are more interested in the development of their children so we all monitored where they were going so all the parents were looking after their children so that was excellent in this area. I mean all the parents we always knew
what our kids were doing and we all worked under that same concept in spite of being from different countries. That was excellent.

Ernesto adds another dimension to the relationship among parents and notes that it is often driven strongly by the relationships of the children themselves. He states:

Well I have noticed that with the kids they get along with, they have a group of friends. My son is better friend with 3 or 4 kids. He’s friends with everyone but he gets along more with his core group of 4 or 5 children. So with those 4 or 5 children they get together often. So they have sleepovers and all that. So with that group of 4 or 5 children more or less we have a good relationship I mean we know their parents. Sometimes we have gone to their house, they’ve come to our house, but it’s not too many of them, just 3 or 4 kids. It’s a small group let’s say because you don’t get along with all the parents. You know them yes and greet them at events but there isn’t a real relationship.

Ernesto also notes how these parental relationships are distinct in their dynamics from his previous experience in Ecuador:

Um, well in Ecuador it’s a little bit different because there because of the familiarity there was a stronger group. I mean not with that many right but on the other hand we had 2 or 3 families with whom we got along really well we were very, very close. Here we are friends but at a certain distance. Over there with a few we were much closer.

When asked what factor he believes makes these relationships more distant he explains:

I would say culture. Culture. You can’t be good friends with a family of say, who are, if they are Italians and another is from here, or Armenian and the other is from Jam, Sri Lanka o Madagascar or the like. You know what I mean from Africa? There isn’t a way to establish a lot of communication or a relationship because of the culture piece.
The Ventura-Cruz family also encountered some challenging relationships with personnel at the school level in their experience. As the end of high school neared for Ernesto Jr. both he and his family were unsure about his future plans. Elena recounts a situation where a difference of opinion between her and her husband and Ernesto Jr.’s guidance counselor was a challenge. She explains:

Because with Ernesto Jr. there was the question often times if he should continue his studies, right, and even though we, every year our strategy has been to repeat, repeat, repeat, that they have to get a university degree, in a way brainwashing them. To put in their head that that is what they have to do since they were children. That’s why we have always told Juan that he is going to be a doctor and he has acquired that as well. Besides it seems that would be a good fit for him but he’ll have to decide when the time comes. But with Ernesto Jr. there was a moment when he doubted himself because in his school which is one the best schools in this area this teacher, the guidance counselor…advised his students that one of the careers that they should pursue was plumbing because of the level of income that it would generate and that in the long term they would make a minimum of $80,000 since there is a lack of plumbers. So it was at a trades level, what are those called, skilled trades. So this was the recommendation from the counselor to his students, in general to all of them.

The suggestion that her son should aim to enter a skilled trade caused Elena a lot of internal conflict especially with her own cultural and historical views about careers in that field and her aspirations as an immigrant parent. She explains:

He got that in his head that he was a good plumber that he was going to be a good plumber. Sometimes perhaps when you look at things in that way, you are not racist, that’s not it’s called, what do you call it, but you look down on those careers, it’s not that you look down on them, maybe we do in our culture but for me that wasn’t what I was hoping for. I felt frustrated that my son was going to do that. But if I had to do it what else could I do but accept it but I saw it as a mistake.
Elena resolved this situation with the help of her father who reinforced the goals and aspirations that they had for Ernesto Jr.:

So um obviously he had it in his head for a month, etcetera and I think that I told my father. My father had a plumber who always helped us out at home and so he said to him, “Son, if you want I’ll send you with” what’s his name, “to our plumber so if you want to go into plumbing don’t worry, I’ll send to you him for a year so that he can teach you and you’ll learn well”. He was like in shock…So he was like that for 1 month turning it around in his head and then he got over it obviously he saw that he didn’t get any acceptance of his idea on our part and that’s how it happened.

The situation was resolved in the end and it reaffirmed Elena’s commitment to setting objectives for her children and communicating these to them. After this minor setback, things were back on track for Ernesto Jr.:

And he forgot about it in one-way or another but that idea came from the school. But I think that for them, let’s say, we have the certainty now that in some way they will continue on the path that the family has to be constantly talking about the objectives that they have to achieve.

Elena describes the difference in approaches to the future between this one school official and the Ventura-Cruz family:

I went to talk to the counselor and then I noticed that the level that the counselor was coming from in this case didn’t encourage, the way he talked about things, didn’t encourage his students to strive. Because he said to me, “Ma’am, don’t worry because it’s better that if he doesn’t want to do something major well let him do what he can.” So I would say, “I want him to pursue what he wants to, what he likes but you can’t let my son, just because right now he doesn’t have enough maturity, choose the simplest thing and finally realize years later that it was a mistake when I am convinced that he is capable of studying something more.”…So if the counselor is motivating them towards what’s simple, what
requires minimal effort, what do you expect? Our Hispanic values are that we can overcome if we strive and come out on top; it’s only a questions of putting that in your mind versus here whatever happens happens.

Elena views this as a major conflict between the culture she brings as a parent and the culture that the school promotes:

So, that is in high school I think that there is….this like conflict. Now I think that this conflict doesn’t exist when you are from the Canadian world. Maybe they don’t see it as a conflict because they say ok, it’s just like that. On the other hand, with us who think in another way, for us it’s a conflict because we are not convinced of this way of, of. I mean for us it’s you can achieve what you want, you can always achieve what you want. It’s only a matter of effort; a little more a little less effort. On the other hand here it’s no, maybe you are not capable of doing that. Maybe your mental level is not for that. Do you understand me? Who knows what you should do? So, we, for me it’s simply every person is capable of accomplishing what they what, what you want. So, here it’s the other way, look, maybe you should pursue these careers because see they don’t require that much effort, it’s not for everyone they tell you, that’s not for everyone, It’s true it’s not for everyone…but no, why do you have such low goals for people when they can do it.

She also notes that as students enter high school, schools defer less to parents and are reluctant to involve them in the decision-making. This is something that conflicts with her own ideas about children and parents and their role within a family. Elena explains:

In elementary school and in Secondary School yes they supported me, I think that I wasn’t being completely incoherent as well so and what I was suggesting was correct and they supported me in some way. I felt a little less support in Secondary School where they would say, ok let him do what he wants to in some way. Let him do what he wants. It was there that I didn’t agree because I thought that, that a youth of 16 doesn’t necessarily know what he should do. Here they
think that he does know. So I don’t think he does. So there we were at opposite ends and it’s where I felt a challenge.

The family also encountered a challenging relationship with one of Juan’s teachers early on in his school. Elena remembers that one year he refused to go to school although previously he had enjoyed school and performed well. Elena was concerned about Juan and talked with other parents and students about her son’s experience and finally went to the teacher to express her concerns. She describes the conversations and its outcome:

It was a conversation, rather it was a plan, “You know what I have a concern, my concern is that my son doesn’t want to come to school and my son has always come to school. So it just so happens that this year with you he particularly doesn’t want to come to school. He doesn’t feel well, I don’t know what the problem is, but the only thing is that he doesn’t want to come to school and this has to change. Your have to help me to get him to come to school.” So I think she understood my message very clearly and adjusted and we succeeded, we succeeded and Juan integrated into the group…The important thing is that you have to know what is happening with your children so that you can support them. So we knew about this and I wanted to talk to the teacher and I said to her unfortunately my son is a, not a model child, but he’s a good child I mean we are not troublesome people, he isn’t either, he is a very respectful person and as it turns out he has always been fine at school and it just so happens that this year he doesn’t want to come study with you.

These experiences highlight Ernesto and Elena’s perspectives on parent involvement and what they see as their role in the education of their children. In comparing the experiences as a parent in Ecuador versus Canada, Ernesto notes that their level involvement is affected by their newness as immigrants to the school culture and environment. In evaluating their involvement he states:

Well, um, I think that it has been enough, we have been involved at a good level in school trying to attend all the events, all the sessions, talks and workshops. Um, I would say a good level because we have wanted to really fulfill that
purpose because we are new parents in this environment. So every time there is a
meeting we try and we have seen that we are among the parents that attend the
meetings most regularly. Yes, um, I think that we are not the ideal but we are
trying to do what we can with the time we have precisely because we are new.

Ernesto contrasts his level of involvement or participation with other parents and puts it
in context of the overall level of involvement of parents in his sons’ schools. He refers to
involvement around the post-secondary transition process:

Information for example the talks for instance on information for university.
There are a couple of parents that attend. Of the 500 students, 100 parents attend.
So, it gives you an idea that there are some parents that are interested in learning
about the options that their children have for university let’s say. And there are
many events that we see parents don’t have a great interest in. Or I don’t know
it’s because of work, whatever.

Interestingly, Ernesto Jr. Also notes an increased level of participation to what he
remembers in Ecuador:

Um, I actually don’t remember going, them going to any parent teacher
interviews. They used to go a lot here cause they like to be like involved, now.7

Both Ernesto and Elena believe that they play an important role within their children’s
education. Ernesto see his involvement in his children’s education as one of his key
responsibilities as a parent. This involvement involves support and setting high
expectations as he describes:

Well from my point of view, I think that a parent’s role in education is basic, it’s
fundamental because um I see that parents have a lot, great responsibility in the
development of their children. Not only economic because yes if your parents can
pay for your education that’s good, if they can’t pay for their education the child

7 The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No
translation of this interview was done.
is not going to have as many opportunities right? But also the act of placing demands because there are many children that need that, that whip, the demand. I mean go, you have to, have to, have to do this because otherwise time is going to keep going and he’ll be 21 or 22 years old and not doing anything and working at Home Depot or Tim Horton’s for the rest of his life.

Setting high standards for her children and supporting their achievement of these goals is also a key part of how Elena views her role as a parent in her children’s education. Elena remembers that in Grade 11 Ernesto Jr.’s marks began to drop as he neglected his studies. Concerned about his gambling on the high expectations they had for him she took quick and decisive actions that involved the school. She recounts this experience:

The issue was that because of the marks I found and the ones that he showed me and also by virtue of the fact that I saw him getting together with his friends a lot, watching television a lot, nothing mattered and life was easy, relaxed. He wasn’t doing anything bad, he wasn’t a bad kid no no no he wasn’t drinking or on drugs, nothing, thank God. But I am always aware, so um I noticed that his grades were going down and without him knowing one day I went to his school to address my doubts. I went to talk to the teachers and asked them for his marks, I need to know his marks. So obviously the guidance counsellor gave me all his marks and I confirmed that they weren’t what we expected and in shock, it was a shocking conversation because the counsellor called him down and he didn’t know I was there. He thought he was in some trouble when the counsellor called him down and I was there. And we started to talk about his future what he planned to do etcetera. And he was very clear, I told the counsellor that I wanted him to be very clear and to tell to tell him that if he keeps up these kinds of marks he’s not going anywhere; he’s not going to get into college even. Of course no, if you compared his marks versus other kids he was fine. But, but for the goal he was not good, according to me. The counsellor supported me very well in that way and he told him very frankly, “I mean you have to be honest, what’s going on, why don’t you want to study, what are you doing, what is the reason why you aren’t trying”…even though we disagreed on a lot of things, he was the one who
brought up the plumbing idea and everything, I had many disagreements with him but this time he helped me a lot and then I went to talk with the math teacher and all the other teachers. There wasn’t one teacher I didn’t speak to. And I asked them clearly to call me or send me a note I gave them my phone number if my son’s marks start to drop I need to know immediately. Or if he does something that you think he shouldn’t do. Call me, I need that support from you or else how am I going to know. So Ernesto Jr. knew that all the teachers knew and I had talked to them. So he was calm. Of course the teachers didn’t say anything but he knew what was happening an he started being a little more responsible. He reacted and started to improve. Obviously to get him to study every day it was, “Study, study, study, stop chatting, get off MSN.” And then in Grade 12 he strove on his own I didn’t have to say much. And I obviously continued monitoring but not as closely as in grade 11.

Elena’s strategy of involving the school and keeping open lines of communication with teachers employed in this situation is something that she and her children note as a tried and effective method. She provides another more informal example of this practice:

I think that it is basic so I become friends with the teachers. For example, I was good friends with the Spanish teacher at Ernesto Jr’s school. I would go and help her host events that she wanted to do in Spanish at school and she would tell me who my son was hanging around with and she would tell me be careful with that kid he’s not good, he’s not a good kid, careful that they don’t become too close. Things like that and that is important. So my sons would say of course you have all your spies watching [laughs]. You go and you talk to everyone and they keep you in the loop. So that has been my role to be after them, attentive all the time. Using all the means possible. Because if you are careless they get lost. They get lost in less time than you expect.

To reinforce her message to Ernesto Jr. about the importance of taking his education seriously Elena also used a hard day’s work experience to drive the point home. She recounts this experience:
We were worried about Ernesto Jr. and what happens to many people. I spoke recently with an Argentine man who had a son of the same age as Ernesto Jr. and he is an engineer, the father, and his son dropped out of high school. So well, Ernesto Jr. never thought of dropping out but I was worried about Ernesto Jr. and the he understand how important this was so I called a friend. He didn’t work, Ernesto Jr., didn’t work yet. I called a friend who had a catering company so I told her, “Help me out, have my son be a server in your catering company.” So she said, “Of course, Elena tell him to come a couple of nights but the work is really hard,” she told me. That was exactly what I wanted. I could have helped him to get something easier, more comfortable, at the bank perhaps but no that was exactly what I wanted him to do. So I told him, “Ernesto Jr., you either get your own job or you’re working at this catering company. But you have to learn the meaning of working without having studied.” So he went to do catering, pressured by us that he had to go. I mean it wasn’t his own idea. He went to serve and with dress shoes and everything like they do. He came back absolutely dead that night so we went to drop him off at 6 in the afternoon and we went to pick him up at 3 in the morning and he was absolutely dead. And I remember that he said to us, his words were, “Now I really learned that I have to do a university career because I am not going to live like this ever. Because it’s so hard, he would say and there is so much. I can’t understand how 50, 30 year old people do this work.”

Setting high standards for their children as parents is a key part of Elena and Ernesto’s perspective on their role in their children’s education for now and in the future. Elena explains how important this element of involvement is to her children’s continued success:

I think that, unless you have a star child, one of those street kids that have something within them that makes them succeed even though they have suffered a lot, because there are cases like that where kids that didn’t have the support of their parents prevailed and succeeded. In most cases where the parents are present I think that their role is indispensable. If the parents don’t establish goals in their
children from when they are little, they don’t put into their little heads what it is they have to do, I think that we commit, they commit errors and that doesn’t happen because the child doesn’t find themselves. I mean it’s as simple as repeating the same thing, you are going to be this. I mean if you repeat the same thing I am going to be successful, I am going to be successful your brain switches to that. It switches and knows that that’s what it has to do, but if you are negative and repeat the negativity all the time, the same negativity, you end up doing poorly. So the parent repeats to their children what they have to do. They repeat if day after day what it is they have to do, where it is that they are headed even though maybe it is tiresome for them sometimes but that is the key. Secondly, you have to be there with them all the time, helping them, supporting, helping them to find a way out of problems that they face and I think that that’s how things start going, they start going well. But if the parents, if not even them, if a parent doesn’t have the slightest idea of where they want their children to go or what they want them to be or don’t aspire to anything for their children, how are their children going to aspire to something for themselves unless they are very, very mature children that at that age can identify good from bad. So it’s all a question of aspirations and where you establish them, I mean, where you establish that line to measure. If as parents you say, “OK I am establishing the line really low here, go, leave, work in construction, OK work in whatever” but if you establish a higher goal your children seek after that higher goal. And who establishes that goal? It’s not going to be the immature children—it’s the parents. So it all depends on where you place that line.

Elena explains where she puts “the line” for her children in terms of the standards and expectations she sets for them:

We the Hispanic professionals, I would say the parents who are Hispanic professionals I think we want to set the standard really high for our children. We want them to succeed and we set these, these goals on them and many other cultures do it too, right? Many others from other countries especially if their parents were professionals, I think that they try to get their children there at least
as well. And I think that parents who are not professionals too, they have tried to have their children succeed as well right? But this isn’t part of Canadian culture they way I see it. The educational system, I don’t think, I don’t feels it’s that important.

Ernesto Jr. corroborates with his mother about the high expectations that his parents place on him. He states:

They kind of put a lot of like pressure on us, like make us feel that, I don’t know, but yeah like pressure… To do good, get good marks, get a like finish university and all.8

Juan speaks about his parent’s involvement also as their participation in school activities. He mentions that they attend:

Well they come to parent teacher night and the open house and barbecue night. They always talk to my teacher since I’ve had him for 2 years now.9

In addition to setting high expectations for her children, Elena also constantly monitors their progress towards these goals and provides whatever support is necessary for them to be successful. She explains how she accomplishes this:

Well, I particularly try to support them. Perhaps my style is more to monitor them, to supervise them, to see what they are doing, what they have to do. It’s my way of supporting them regularly because of the fact that I don’t have much time to be with them all the time like a lot of mothers that are around all day. It turns out that the time that I am with them I am practically asking, “Did you finish your homework, did you do this, did you do that?” I am monitoring what they had to do during the day. And I think that this is because of the fact that I’m not with

8 The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.
9 The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.
them for much time. So, I don’t have to time to say, “OK let’s sit and chat about this or that”, I am sometimes monitoring that things are in their place.

Juan agrees with this perspective as he describes what he thinks his parents’ role in his education is:

Well, I think they’re positions should be kind of like making sure I’m doing my homework and stuff and making sure I’m trying my hardest and I think they’re doing it pretty well.

When things are going off track Juan believes that his parents would:

Well if stopped trying or stopped wanting to do my work I think they’d be like what are you doing, what’s happening, is there something like at school is someone like doing something to you. I guess they’d ask like if something weird is happening to me.

While monitoring her children’s progress is one kind of support, Elena also provides support to each of her children based on their individual needs. She describes the support that she provides for her younger son, Juan:

Well, with Juan we share more with each other because he likes to do his homework together. For example, he loves studying with me. So when he has a test he waits for me to study with him. So both of us study. That’s the idea with him; I have to study whatever he is studying. So both of us study, he reads and I am very interested in what he is studying. Then I quiz him. That is the support.

This support differs from the one for Ernesto Jr.:

With Ernesto Jr. he doesn’t open himself up too much. He self-monitors or doesn’t like to share too much about what he is doing. So it’s more about, “What exam do you have, you’re here, let me see your marks, where are you going, are you coming soon, what time are you getting home, who are you with, etcetera, etcetera…We’ve had difficult moments where we have had to sit down with Ernesto Jr. Mainly, I’ve had to sit down with him crying and I’m crying about
him having to do what is good, to make him aware so that he can reach his goals. That he has to reach his goals. I mean sensitizing him to the fact that he has to achieve, what he should expect of himself first and secondly what we expect him to accomplish…I got him a math tutor. To come, for him to call whenever he wants. So he had all the support, I said, “Listen, don’t worry about money, we are going to pay. If you need to call him, call him. I mean if you don’t study and don’t get good marks it’s because you don’t want to, you are not dumb.” And he did it, and is happy.

The support that she provided her son has produced the desired results. These include Ernesto Jr.’s acknowledgment of the contribution that his mother’s involvement made to his educational experience. Elena recalls a recent conversation:

In part of that conversation he said to me, “What I am thankful to you for is that if you hadn’t pushed so much like you pushed me” at that time when his marks were declining, because he was partying too much, his marks were declining at the beginning of, I think at the beginning of grade 11, or mid way through grade 11, “I wouldn’t have entered university otherwise, because you practically had me up against the wall.”

The experience of parent involvement in their children’s education for Ernesto and Elena has not been without its challenges especially when it comes to interactions with the curriculum. Ernesto recognizes that at a certain level he is limited in his participation because of a lack cultural knowledge of the system and its expectations especially in contrast to the kind of knowledge and support he would have been able to provide his children within an Ecuadorian context.

I would say that it had more impact, I mean there was more, you had more impact on education because at that level we could say more in every aspect. And because of the knowledge of the environment. I mean it’s totally different here because here we can’t help them much so we lose the protagonist role of educating our children. Or in a lot of topics…if you ask me to do a funny poem in English, I am in real trouble. In Spanish, we did dumb little recitations about
flowers falling from heaven\(^{10}\) and all that stuff, you know those. We can do that for a child but if you ask me to do that in English the most I can do is whatever, I can do a rhyming poem in English. Wow. It could be a from a first grader. So many of us lose the protagonist role in education. Above all in elementary education. If you ask who is John Smith, I have to first go and study who John Smith is, or the Prime Minister of Canada and all that. So I don’t have a clue what they are talking about. I can’t teach my son to write in English or grammatical rules in English or things like that. Or do an essay in English. Because maybe a 3\(^{rd}\) grader knows better English than I do.

In spite of this barrier, Ernesto has attempted to regain his position as a key actor in his son’s education by capitalizing on his strengths and sharing these with his children. He explains:

Now, I’ve started to take back with my oldest son in certain areas like Physics, Mathematics, Computers. Yes. Where I can maybe know more than his teacher. So, that makes, it puts me in the protagonist role. My son recognizes that perhaps I know more than his teacher. In the technical subject I think we can help them a lot.

Ernesto and Elena both place a very high value on education for their children. Ernesto believes that education is useful for the purpose of furthering one’s career but also furthering one’s personal development. For Ernesto these two converge in the selection of one’s career path and the motivations for that selection:

I think that education should have 2 basic principles. The first I think should be personal development, that is to say that this I think is the most important thing to know. I mean to say, you should educate yourself, study so that you can develop and be OK with yourself. Not for the sake of knowledge but as a life purpose. Yes, a life purpose. I mean education is part of your purpose in life about why the

\(^{10}\) This refers to a traditional poem that children learn in school in celebration of Mother’s Day. “Del Cielo Cayo Una Rosa” is the traditional title in Spanish.
hell you came into this world. And the other is as a tool for your well-being; it can help you achieve well being. That doesn’t mean making money. Because there are people who are studied and it doesn’t matter to them to have money and they live in poverty or I don’t know like Gandhi who was a studied man who lived in poverty but he was happy, apparently he was happy being poor. But he chose to be poor. So this is an example but we don’t all want to be studied individuals and like poor people we want to have certain comforts; a house, even an apartment even if it’s a rental, money for transportation on the TTC or whatever. To have our welfare and not live begging or to have something for when you are old, some savings that will let you live with dignity. But that is secondary, it should help you I think help you as an individual. I mean help you to be happy. I mean a person who studies to be a doctor I don’t think should study to become a doctor because it’s a secure job that makes at least $120,000 a year but because they want to help or allow people to heal, to make children who get better happy and mothers whose children get better too. That kind of well-being. And we can find that well-being in every job.

Education holds a high value for Elena as well, especially in the very competitive world her children will have to navigate. She sees it as something indispensable and complementary to life experiences and as the first step in a level playing field. She explains what she thinks of education:

It’s critical to the success of a person, to the realization of a person. I mean not only from a professional point for view but because in such a competitive world now it’s indispensable, you can’t turn down education. Because you simply forfeit, you move to a low level in society when you don’t have or you don’t achieve even elementary or secondary education. In Canada, there are a lot of people who, young people who drop out of school without finishing so they move to an inferior level of life within society just because they don’t have education...If you don’t have a higher level of education with which you can compete you are excluded, excluded from the market. Young people today are increasingly more prepared; in the global economy you have youth with many
languages, with a variety of experience. Especially here in Canada, youth have experience from a very young age in customer service things like that. So you compete hard. When I receive resumes from young people seeking work at the bank I see their level, I see their experience and I compare with what I had at that age which was nothing. So, the level of competition is so high, if you don’t have that level of education high you are excluded from the market immediately. So for me it’s critical, its mandatory I mean you can’t put it aside.

Communicating these values to their children is a long-term endeavor. As Elena explains, this process is often at odds with the culture in which they find themselves:

I think that it has been a long activity of 2, 3, 4 years of talking with them sometimes rebuking them, sometimes simply showing them because here in this culture it’s too easy for young people at 17, 18 years old to become self sufficient. They go and live with their girlfriend, they rent a place and each one works at whatever job, landscaping or whatever, they set up house and start living. And that’s how they make a life right? … With the fact that Ernesto Jr. has been a little more tied down with summer jobs, jobs in the afternoons so he has had several work experiences and has seen the difference between a job that a person works at with a university degree and one that one works at with high school or college training I mean without preparation. So they understand the difference that one requires a lot of effort and pays little versus the other one.

Since a major reason for moving with their family was to provide an excellent education for their children; the hope is that they will appreciate all the sacrifices made for their future. Elena asserts:

On the other hand I think that they will value what we have said later and I think that later on they will remember, certainly our parents pressured us and they encouraged us or they used any means necessary for us to achieve. In fact, Ernesto Jr. in one of our last conversations we had said to me, “Honestly, Mom, if you hadn’t put pressure on me, put so much pressure in my last year maybe I wouldn’t have got into university”. Because I had him really beat with all the
pressure and I was tired too, Ernesto was tired, we were all tired. So, I think that when they are older they are going to look back and they’re going to see that it was worth it and they are going to feel satisfied because they attained it on their own.

Both Juan and Ernesto are already beginning to understand the efforts of their parents and appreciate how it has helped them. Ernesto Jr. explained that his parents always tell him:

> Be grateful we’re in this country and all that stuff… they always tell me how like they sacrificed their like work there and like all the kind of the life there to come here for like us.\(^\text{11}\)

When asked why he thinks his parent chose to immigrate he states:

> Yeah that’s cause they wanted us to get a better education…‘cause like if you get like a degree in Ecuador you probably wont like get too much here with that degree, so they wanted us to get a degree here so that we could pretty much go anywhere I guess.\(^\text{12}\)

He understands that for his parents his and his brother’s education is a priority. He explains what he thinks they’ll feel when this goal is accomplished:

> Like they did their job and like the reason they came here was fulfilled.\(^\text{13}\)

Juan agrees and thinks that his parent’s would say:

> It’s been a really good choice to come here for my education and stuff.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^\text{11}\) The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.

\(^\text{12}\) The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.

\(^\text{13}\) The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.

\(^\text{14}\) The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.
Both children have also adopted their parents’ values of the purpose and function of education. Juan thinks the purpose of education is:

To go to university get a good job and get a get married, get a family support your family, their education. I guess to just make you happy with your family...like a good job where you are getting kind of paid well enough for like food and stuff for your house. A good job would be like a job you like and a job you’re making enough money and it’s getting you to live pretty well...with education you would get a job to support a family.15

Ernesto Jr. echoes this perspective using his parents as an example. For him the purpose of education is:

To get a better job which will make you happy in the future...Like the job you like. Like my dad likes computer science and then he likes, my mom’s always like complaining how she like, she doesn’t like dealing with all the complaining customers all that stuff; my dad says yeah well I love my job.16

Equally as important as their formal academic education is the moral and cultural education that the Ventura-Cruz children receive at home. Ernesto expresses the great efforts they make to maintain cultural value and traditions in the 2nd generation:

And even though in some ways they are Canadian because they have accepted, have adopted this culture, that is to say that if you were to ask them to sing the national anthem of Ecuador they don’t know it, they know the Canadian national anthem, those kinds of things. They feel like they are from this context but even still we continue to struggle a bit so that those roots of being Hispanic are not completely forgotten.

15 The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.
16 The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.
Elena places a high value on the cultural and moral traditions of her heritage and would like her children to continue them but also understands and accepts that more than likely they will adopt the best of both cultures to which they belong. She explains:

In Canadian culture, mostly 90% of the kids end up independent and 100% distant from their families practically. If they see their parents once or twice a year that’s a lot. On the other hand, our Hispanic culture is the complete opposite…Myself for example I speak to my parents several times a week even though I am far away which I don’t think would happen with them if I was far away, does that make sense? So, that is very difficult to maintain and I think that it’s an issue that in some way we have to get out Hispanic young people to have strong cultural roots and value our way of life too. It has its benefits. I think that there is a moral benefit, I mean that our moral values, Hispanic ones, I would say are a little more in demand than Canadian ones. The family values that you have to help out your parents, respect them, support them in their old age because in the end you’ll have to live the same thing. This is much stronger among Hispanics than in Canadians. Also, our culture although people may say that it’s a bit old fashioned, is I think that is important in light of the Canadian lifestyle; the act of respecting a young lady until you are married. We are more morally conservative, we are more empowered than North Americans I would say not just Canadians. So I think that there are a lot of benefits and that similarly there are many benefits to this culture here too but if they could combine the strengths of each side that would be ideal.

The Ventura-Cruz family has high aspirations for their children’s education and professional future. This however is coupled with a desire to maintain the strong traditions of their cultural heritage and unity among the family. Ernesto explains his hopes that their ambitious goals are not at the cost of these moral and familial values:

That is a very important issue but I think that, I hope that it doesn’t sacrifice the fact that they as children don’t lose their relationship with their parents as typically happens here, with many, many young people when they graduate they practically make their own life totally distant and independent and they almost
Elena sees their ambitious goals and their moral and family values as going hand in hand in their children’s future:

I think that they should achieve their profession, and maintain themselves financially, on their own at an adequate level. I would like for them to support their family, we are of the way of thinking that we believe in family unity, we believe there should be a family, we believe that they should have their children, their wife and maintain that family together forever. I think they’ve taken some if this from us and I think it will benefit them.

Both Ernesto Jr. and Juan are aware of these hopes their parents have and are doing their best to fulfil them, however, they face no easy task as challenges are many in a cultural climate that is different from the one their parents are familiar with. Juan learns about his cultural traditions by doing projects on his country of origin at school but it’s not easy:

Yeah, I feel that sometimes it’s like different like when we do kind of like well not really project but we do some like kind of cultural stuff it feels a little different to be like the only from Ecuador and stuff.  

Ernesto Jr. finds it challenging to balance North American teenage life with the familial expectations of his parents.

Yeah, I, they’re always like you should spend more time with us. I try but it’s hard to balance it all, with work, friends, yeah…[In Ecuador] like you needed your parents to go anywhere, like you had to go with your parents like to a party

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17 The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.
or like get them to drive you but here you can walk to the park or like walk to the mall, which is not very far.\textsuperscript{18}

As this family continues to build on their high expectations for every member and support for one another has a challenging road ahead but they are determined to succeed together.

\textsuperscript{18} The interview that this excerpt is drawn from was originally conducted in English. No translation of this interview was done.
Chapter 7
Vasquez-Mejia Family

Brenda Vasquez and her son Victor Mejia live in a small basement apartment in the North East part of Toronto. Brenda heard about the research project through a colleague at her job at a Gelato store in the downtown core. She contacted me shortly after her colleague shared the information with her. I shared with her the details of the study and when she agreed to participate we set up a convenient time to meet. Although she was interested in participating in the study, she had some concerns about being a single mother and not representing the typical experience. She was also concerned about me wanting to interview her extended family such as her mother and step-father. I assured her that any information about her unique experience would be helpful to the study and that I would only interview those individuals with whom she would connect me. She agreed to participate in the study and we arranged our meeting place. Since her other job cleaning offices was in the financial district, we had our first meeting in a student office at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. At that time her son was in Ecuador on holidays with his father. We completed her life history interview in a couple of sessions at the student office and waited until her son returned to interview him and complete the family focus group. In late August her son returned and she contacted me to set up the interview. I went over to their apartment and over herbal tea and Colombian empanadas at their kitchen table, I interviewed Victor and immediately after we completed the focus group with both of them concluding the data collection.

7.1 Brenda

At the time of her initial interview Brenda was 32 years old and had been in Canada for two and half years. Brenda was born in Quito, Ecuador and completed all her studies there. As a young girl she remembers being an excellent student who was very self-disciplined and diligent. She remembers putting a lot of pressure on herself to perform and sometimes breaking under the very high expectations she had for herself. She recalls:
I was a good student and responsible, I never gave a cause for concern not even at home. At least during elementary school I was, I would say too responsible about my studies. If for some reason I forgot about my homework I would get up at dawn crying and I would do my homework right then and there. I was too extreme in my education growing up; I think that I loved having my nose in books!

The extreme demands that she put on herself would sometimes worry her father and he would try to convince her to take a more balanced approach. Brenda remembers one of these exchanges with her father:

So you would go to bed at 8PM maybe 9PM if you were pushing it, I was in my room with the door closed to sleep and I remember that I would get up crying at 12AM, 1AM in the morning and my dad would be scared and he’d say to me, “What’s happening?” “I forgot to do my English homework.” “Don’t worry you can do it in the morning before you go to school.” “No I’m going to get up and do it right now.”

She also recalls that during these formative years that the academic performance of her brothers paled in comparison to her own:

My mother would wake us up early to study when we had exams because over there you have to write exams at the end of every term. So the boy would get up, there are 3 kids in my family, they would get up and kind of read over things and fall asleep, but not me I would sit up and start reviewing and studying.

By the time she reached Secondary School, Brenda had burned out. She was tired of the pressure she put on herself, but fortunately her performance didn’t suffer and she was able to graduate from high school and go onto university. She reflects on her educational trajectory:

I think that I demanded too much of myself that’s why when I got to Secondary School I felt lazy. I had tired myself out too quickly, but in spite of that I didn’t stop being responsible for my studies and I finished on time.
Brenda’s parents were supportive of their children’s education although they didn’t always demonstrate it in conventional ways. Brenda recalls that she was a baton twirler in elementary school and although she enjoyed the sport she didn’t feel encouraged to continue on or get involved in other athletic activities. She explains:

I did it [baton twirling] when I was just a little girl of maybe about 8 years old around there. I think that it really motivates you and I would have liked very much I think to do a lot of different athletic things during my childhood but unfortunately because of a lack of support or encouragement for ours parents we didn’t do it.

Her siblings had a similar experience and she recalls that one of her brothers who went to on participate in high school athletics and did so without the involvement of his parents or family. She shares one of his experiences:

The only one who did it [athletics] in secondary school was my brother, who competed in races. A friend of my mother was around at the competitions one day by luck and she had to award him the winning medal because none of us even know that he was competing in these races that were sponsored by a national newspaper or something like that. He won the gold medal. He got home and gave the gold medal to my mother.

After completing high school, Brenda went on to study architecture and the Central University of Ecuador. It was while she was in university that she had her first and only child Victor. She graduated as a mother first as she puts it:

First I graduated from motherhood and right after that I graduated as an architect. I graduated when my son was 3 years old but I never stopped studying… I was absent from classes for a month on maternity leave but then I caught up, my classmates helped me catch up. They would always stop by and give me the assignments. And well I kept going and that’s how I graduated.
After graduation, she was very successful in her field and worked for a number of building and design firms both public and private that significantly impacted the urban landscape of Quito. She shares her professional history:

I started working with a foundation from Spain on the restoration of a church over there, La Compañía de Jesús. Then from there I was just drawing and designing. Then I went to work, I started to working in construction…then I was redeployed to another site to do works planning and other large projects, tenements mainly…then I did a bit of mechanical engineering designing metallic structures and shortly after a friend who worked for the city called me to work with her…in what was financial audits for civic works, projects…and then I went to metallic structures but was metallic coverings installation.

She practiced to the full range and scope of her profession and had great success in her work. She remembers this time in her life as being very hectic:

I was working, but I didn’t work a 9-5 as they say. Supposedly I was supposed to start at 9 and be done at 5 but I was working from 8 or 7 in the morning, I was at the job sites at 7 and I was leaving to go home at 7 or 8 at night leaving him at home. I didn’t have a consistent schedule and I was devoted to my work, to doing my work and I would go home and see my son, help him with his homework, guide him and then back to our home, because I had help from his grandparents on his father’s side who watched him after school.

7.2 Pre-Migration

Victor started his schooling a very early age attending pre-school while his mother was working. Brenda comments on the many things he learned in that setting some even ahead of his developmental level:

So he attended a day care where, he went when he was 4, at 4 he could recognize colours, he could write his name, I mean when he was done there he had learned a lot. He know a lot of things for his age, he could write his name, and identify
colours, he could say the alphabet and count up to 10. For a 4-year-old child from here that is a lot!

From pre-school Victor went on to be enrolled in a tri-lingual private school which provided instruction in Spanish, English and Italian. Brenda speaks about this school:

After pre-school up to 3rd grade he was in a school that was bilingual, sorry, trilingual. It was called Luigi Carboni and it was a school where they taught English, Italian and Spanish. So he had an advantage when he got to Canada because he had a good English vocabulary. He had quite a large English vocabulary and he also remembers certain works in Italian that he sometimes uses or sings because he remembers the songs in Italian.

Victor has good memories of his early schooling experience. He most enjoyed any time art was part of the instruction although he was a good student in all subjects. In looking back on Victor’s educational experience, Brenda has gained a new found appreciation of the foundations of the instruction her son received. She explains:

In that aspect I was very satisfied with the education over there, sometimes we criticized the education that it was too old fashioned, that over there they only teach you the same old thing. But if you look around there are a lot of people here at least that don’t know where your country is in the world. They ask “Is it around Africa?” And one has to respond, “No it’s in South America, it is a Latin American country.” We are in the same American area, in the same part of the world, but we don’t know anything about the other cultures or countries.

Knowledge about one’s own country and the world at large is something that Brenda values and which she appreciated was part of the education in her country of origin and which is lacking from her experience with education in her new home. She describes her observations:

You had an education at a cultural level, at the level of civic processes, historical knowledge about your country, about the world, at the level of general cultural
knowledge and geographic as well. You come to know the world through its history that you learned at the elementary level.

In the same vein, the moral and social values of her home nation are something which she appreciated and is lacking in her experience of the school system in Canada. She explains:

Respect for your parents, respect for your family. If you are in class, paying attention to the lesson, not talking in class, not interrupting in class. There are many things which I have never seen here.

In comparing the academic rigor of Ecuadorian education to Canadian education, Brenda feels that her son arrived with more academic preparation and stronger learning habits. She describes the difference she observed:

In mathematics, you learn mathematical processes that are very advanced. When we got here I was very surprised because my son was in 3rd grade and when he was in my country he learned and was multiplying 2 and 3 digits. When we got here they were just learning addition with 2 digits and I was like “Oh what’s going on here, isn’t this an advanced country and the education is lacking in this way.” I mean in these educational processes I can say that over there-there was much more discipline, more respect towards the teachers, towards disciplining the students, the values and principles of the students as well…So in that way my son arrived here with a stronger foundation. He has done well in mathematics since he arrived and even though he didn’t speak English he was good at mathematics and he continues to be, so I think that he came with a higher academic level.

In spite of her busy work life, Brenda was very involved in her son’s schooling in Ecuador. She describes her participation in ways like assisting him with homework:

Obviously having a parent presence helps. I have sat with him in the afternoons telling him do this. First you complete this. When he didn’t understand I would
explain it to him and he would do it.

While her son was studying in Ecuador, Brenda saw her role in her son’s education as being one of guidance and supervision. She defines her main responsibilities as:

Simply to guide him. To really monitor that he fulfills all his obligations and to stay on top of thing so that they go the right way as much in school as at home.

Another key aspect of her role was as an advocate for her son when the schools values conflicted with the educational experience she wanted her son to have based on her own educational experience and her perspectives on childrearing. She recalls one such incident:

My son was about 7 I think he was in 1st grade. He didn’t know Italian so to help him study vocabulary words I would make him draw picture and write the words underneath and he would review how to spell them so that he wouldn’t forget how they looked. But he couldn’t really pronounce the words since they were in Italian so we made a little notebook of these picture and words. So whenever we were studying for tests I would have him do that. And he would also carry it around in his backpack. He would take out all his notebooks at school and put them in his desk. The teacher was walking by and noticed the notebook and she began to take all his notebooks out of his desk and told him that he had been cheating. In class she graded the test from him and threw it in my son’s face and ripped it up in the middle of the class in front of all his classmates accusing him of cheating. This to a child of 6 or 7 who didn’t even understand the idea of cheating. So my son came and told me that she had given him another test after. So my son completed the test and the teacher marked it and asked to see me. So I went and I told her that my son told me, he always told me about things that happened. I asked him what happened and he told me, “Mom, I had the notebook that we use to review and she took it from me and ripped out all the pages and she grabbed the test from me in my face in front of all my classmates and she threw it in my face.” And the teacher said to me, “Oh but your son was cheating and this
and that and the other thing.” So I told her, “First of all, please address me respectfully and with all due respect what you did to my son was wrong. It is not fitting for an educator.” She was Italian, not even Ecuadorian, she was Italian. So I told her, “I don’t have an issue with my son getting the grades he deserves, the only thing I ask is that you respect me and not humiliate him in front of his classmates. Because what you are doing is having him lose his self-esteem and you are humiliating him and I don’t like these things. Whatever his mark is whether be it a 0 or a 3 or a 5\textsuperscript{19} or whatever the mark that you want to assign him doesn’t interest me. What I am interested in is what my son knows and what he is learning and that he is not afraid to come to school and face a teacher that has mistreated him.” So after that her attitude change and you could witness it in the test. My son knew the material and scored a 20 when he retook the test.

She explains the differences in her approach versus the teachers at her son’s school and the influence of her own experience on her approach to her son’s learning:

I had certain struggles with teachers because of their way of thinking and attitudes. I am the kind of person that doesn’t expect certain grades from my son. Instead like I once told one of his Italian teachers, I told her, “Look, I’m not interested in his mark, what I am interested in is what he knows and the trust that the has in you to participate in class.” Because I am not interested in him getting’s 20 As or 50 As if he knows absolutely nothing or little about what he learned, if he doesn’t retain anything. I think this is because of my own experiences since I was a memorizer. For example in history and geography, subjects that I never really liked, I would learn everything from memory and I remember that in elementary school I had 20s and 19s, those were the grades over there but if you were to ask me something about geography or history I don’t remember. So I prefer that he learn something and be confident that he is learning and for him to show me what he has learned not just learned it from memory. So

\textsuperscript{19} The grading system in Ecuador is based on a scale of 20 with 20 being the highest and 1 being the lowest.
in these ways I had certain disagreements with the teachers over there because they demand that they cross every $t$ and dot every $i$ exactly as they do or short of it.

Brenda believes that it is important to advocate for her son in order to build his confidence in himself and develop her relationship to him as an ally for the present time and in the future. She explains this important part of her parenting:

I have always defended my son, because it’s a way of reassuring him of his life, his work, I mean if he knows that he can count on his parents with whatever problem or with his mother in this case for whatever problem he is going to trust me, turn to me, but if I don’t defend him when he needs defending he’s never going to share his problems with me. And right now that he is a child one has to earn his trust, not later, later on we all make our own way.

In addition to Brenda’s individual involvement as a parent highlighted in the episodes above, the school also initiated parent involvement opportunities through “Parenting School” which Brenda along with other parents attended. She describes this initiative:

Yes, at the children’s school there was always a person who was there to help you in a of way, they would observe the challenges that children were facing say maybe in their emotional states, they would evaluate these and talk with the parents or they would get you to participate in group therapy sessions where they would help you see the things that you were doing wrong, at a general level with everyone. They didn’t single you out, you are hitting your child, you are making your child suffer because your husband left your home or you because you’re a single parent. They would have us participate generally and would help you to value what you had; to maintain the respect towards your children; to control your emotional state; to know that problems at work should stay at work and not come home. That you when you get home, don’t come in with a bad attitude and kick the dog and shut yourself up in your room not wanting to deal with it. No, not at all, so that was one of the very important values of that school for parents. If you have problems or challenges at work in your daily living or if the neighbour parks
at your door or the dog pees on your front step, leave those things outside, don’t bring them into the home. Because children don’t need to have outside problems taken out on them.

Brenda enjoyed these educational sessions for their content which allowed her to reflect on her parenting practices but also because it allowed her to connect with other parents. She explains how this happened during these times:

So these sessions were very important I remember. They were very interesting because they made you reflect on errors that you were not always aware of. I mean you live day to day and you get used to a routine and don’t even remember the rest. But the minute that it’s pointed out to you, that you are made aware of it, you’re told look at what you are doing and not realizing that you are doing…they make you participate and play you are face to face with another parent and you are laughing together at least you get to know the other person and then as it turns out it’s your child’s friend or maybe your neighbour. So, it was something very interesting because it allowed you to get to know that school environment. It was very positive at least it was something that didn’t affect the children but I think that it enriches you as a person.

7.3 Migration

Brenda’s process of migrating to Canada was facilitated by her mother who was already a resident and offered to sponsor her. Brenda had not ever entertained the idea of migrating since she was comfortable financially and socially in Ecuador. However, Brenda’s mother and her husband suggested the idea of moving at a time when she was feeling restless in her home country so she took the opportunity and began planning. She explains her feelings at the time:

When you are in a situation in your country and you don’t feel content, comfortable because of certain things you make decisions and you say, OK I’m going, see you. So that’s when we started trying, we submitted the paperwork and my mother applied to sponsor us.
It took 1 year from the time she applied to when she was granted permission to enter Canada. When she received the paperwork she had a 1-month timeframe so the move happened very quickly in the Fall of 2007.

Brenda and Victor arrived in Canada and joined Brenda’s mother and her husband. For the first year, they lived all together as an intergenerational family. This arrangement was difficult for Brenda and her son as she explains:

The first months were hard because I was dependent on them economically and everything. I didn’t have enough capital to say well, I’ll pay my rent and you can leave me along. So I would pay my rent in other ways be it helping around the house, cooking, doing the chores of the house. So the moment came at which I didn’t like their criticisms, their comments. They were too hard on my son, he was a boy of 8 who jumped, skipped, ran, moved, he wanted to go out, come in all the time. So my mom was always saying ”Don’t jump you’re disturbing people, stay still don’t watch so much TV, read something” and on that it got to a point where it was tiring. It was tiring. Where it’s your family or not that attitude gets tiring in, it was too negative in that way and I didn’t like that.

Brenda began taking language classes and exploring avenues for validating her credentials. Although she was persistent with her language classes and completed a significant number of levels, her economic situation as a single parent has made it challenging for her to pursue her education. She explains:

So I’m not in any condition to revalidate my credentials because that would require time and money and money is what I have least of at the moment and financial support as well. I also don’t want to get into huge debt with the government and then overnight I might decide that I don’t want to stay in Canada, that I want to go back and I don’t want to have this debt with me for the rest of my life.

Eventually, Brenda and her son acquired their own residence and immediate financial needs forced Brenda to put her studies on hold and take a job cleaning corporate offices
in downtown Toronto. As a young and accomplished professional it has been difficult for Brenda to take on low paying jobs. She speaks about her frustration:

Perhaps that’s why it pains be to be here cleaning washrooms and not practicing my profession when I achieved it at such great sacrifice.

Despite the challenges however, she is determined to forge ahead to and create opportunities to be successful in her new home:

Here in Canada there are courses that you can take on your own that allow you to focus on your training and on looking for work that is appropriate for you, be it as a drafter, or designer for small things, to break into the market, to try and break into the market. It’s not my plan to continue in janitorial services all my life and if I want to stay like that to live in Canada, I would rather go back to my country.

7.4 Post-Migration

As a part of adjusting to their new settings, Victor began to attend school. A friend of Brenda’s helped them with the registration process since he was somewhat familiar with the school system and had time to help them. Brenda refers to him as a stand-in father figure because of the role he played in helping her navigate the registration process:

It was he that practically helped us a bit and guided us and he had to practically go to the school and play the role of the father of my son. I had to go enrol him at school and he had to help me with the paperwork, to get other documents like my license, OHIP. I mean he was very involved with my paperwork because my mother didn’t have the time and neither did my mother’s husband and worse off me who didn’t even know what to do in this country. So he knew a little about the system here, he is a Canadian citizen but he lived in Ecuador, he was born here but came back at the age of 18 so he lived here about 9 years, he lives here and speaks English. So he was practically the one who got me going and supported me very much in that way.

Victor remembers his first day of school and the uneasy feelings that he felt:
I felt weird, like I was different from everybody else and I felt like kind of empty. Soon after Victor started school, Brenda noticed that her son was not being treated well by his peers. She describes the first warning signs of a bullying problem for Victor:

When my son started school he had some problems with certain classmates who took advantage of him. He didn’t speak English and couldn’t really defend himself very well at the beginnings and they would hit him, they would kick him, one time he came home with a black eye almost split open, my son’s eye. I found him crying at his school and nobody told me anything. It was only when I went to pick him up that they told me what had happened.

Brenda was very upset about the repeated abuse that her son was facing and even more so at the fact that the bullying behavior was not being addressed. She decided to go to the principal and voice her concerns, but this was a frustrating experience. She describes how she felt during this interaction:

So the powerlessness of not being able to defend you child, to be able to stand in front of people, in front of those in power and to say, “Well, control these children”. So it did bother me a lot, I think that I wanted to return to Ecuador right then and there and I started to cry out of the anger I had at being powerless.

This sense of powerlessness was overwhelming for Brenda, but fortunately she found a helpful ally in her son’s teacher. He was able to bridge the language gap as his partner was Spanish-speaking and he could help translate Brenda’s concerns. She recalls:

Fortunately his teacher at that time he was married to a Mexican woman and he spoke a bit of Spanish so I spoke to him, he would translate certain things for me and he was the one who had to practically interceded and said “Well, I am reporting the problem” because it had occurred on other occasions that they had hit him. So it wasn’t that he was a problem child but rather that it was other children so then the vice principal used other means practically to punish those children and he punished the other children who attacked my son.
Despite having family in Canada, Brenda felt that she was alone in dealing with this difficult situation given the limited experience of her family members. She speaks mainly of her mother and her limited ability to intervene:

Yes, my mother couldn’t intervene too much either because she doesn’t speak English perfectly. My mother has dedicated her whole life to working in janitorial services or more than in that in like, she hasn’t had jobs that are significant. So my mother doesn’t speak English. I even know more than her now and I have to be reading things for her and telling her what they say and preparing her paperwork.

As in Ecuador, Brenda’s involvement in her son’s education includes advocacy on his behalf as illustrated in the bullying situation that they faced early on. However, Brenda’s involvement as a parent has also included supporting her son in his academic and extra curricular tasks as well as partnering with teachers to develop the best conditions for learning for Victor.

Providing help with assignments and homework that Victor brought home was challenging initially. Gradually, Victor has been able to do more independently as he increases his language skills and maturity allowing Brenda to be involved by monitoring the completion of assigned work. Brenda describes this progression:

Here also we started, at the beginning both of us fumbled sometimes because he would get one time or another a book where he had to complete one or two exercises. But it was in English and since he didn’t speak English, didn’t understand English and I didn’t speak English or understand English [laughs] I had to get a dictionary and translate and I would explain to him in Spanish how to do it but he understood and he would complete it. So, we kept at it like that. So now for example during this last year that we are living on our own he has done his homework on his own and I don’t need to be there supervising, I know that I get home and look over his notebooks and his homework is there and complete and his agenda. So I take the task of getting his notebooks and agenda and signing it every day that his homework is done and seeing what he has completed.
So this is the way I monitor him and that way he continues to have that experience.

Although Brenda makes great efforts to support Victor with his homework, she does feel limited in her ability to do so because of a lack of knowledge about the content and expectations. She speaks about this dichotomy:

The good part is sharing with him in whatever way I can and being able to help him with his homework or with the things he needs. And the bad part is well not having all the knowledge that I would need in order to help him.

Another way that Brenda is involved in Victor’s education is through supporting his extracurricular interests. Despite the limited time she has because of her work schedule she makes great efforts to support his interests:

Victor likes to be very involved in the athletics program and I would go on some trips. I would get time off work and go. I got involved in this because at least I could accompany them to the tournaments with the teacher who was kind of the organizer, I would help to supervise them and check in on them that they didn’t go all over the place. Having to take the Subway 1 single teacher with 20 or 22 children is a bit complicated right? So, I help with that a bit by participating. If I had an hour or hour and a half I would stay with him, I’d drop him back at home and run off to work and done. Or else I would have to ask for time off of work. I would tell them, “Sorry, I am not coming in my son is much more important” and I would go watch his basketball games.

She is motivated to participate as parent in this way because of her own experiences as a child and the desire to cultivate her child’s positive self-image. She explains:

I think that the greatest encouragement that you can have is your parents; for your parent to see you playing and making an effort and standing out. So I think that for a child this is the greatest thing. At least I remember during my school days I was a baton twirler and I loved having them watch me perform and even though I made mistakes they would clap and I felt so happy.
Brenda also participates in Victor’s educational experience by collaborating with his teacher to create the best learning environment for him. One of Victor’s teachers was concerned about his lack of participation in class discussions and shared this with Brenda during a Parent-Teacher conference. Together they developed a plan to monitor and encourage Victor to participate and demonstrate his learning. This was a successful collaboration as Brenda recalls:

So then the teacher told us, “Well, he is too shy and doesn’t want to talk I know that he can and knows but he just doesn’t want to talk.” So we devised a plan between the 2 of us that he was going to give him like 5 lives per week and those 5 lives were for 5 questions that he could ask in Spanish and he would help him translate them. So if he had any questions he had to translate, the teacher would help him translate it but he had to give up 1 life. The first week I think he used up 2 and after that none anymore because after that he was talking he understood, I mean he could communicate very well with his friends but he was scared to talk in class. In that way the teacher helped us a lot.

Brenda also feels that Victor’s exposure to the Arts thorough the curriculum has also helped him to learn to express himself better and lose some of the shyness he had initially as a newcomer student. She explains:

For example, something that I like a lot about here is the arts, that they get them to do a lot in the arts, drama, visual arts. My son loves to paint and he’s really good at paining so that is one of the things that I like very much about the way they incorporate art. Because in another way I think they release their emotions through art. So art and drama has helped him to be more spontaneous, more outgoing. He was very quiet before, he never spoke, he was all yes, no. Sometimes I would say to him, “My son say something, yes or no”. Not so now, now if he has to give his opinion, he does, if he has to say something, he says it to you, if he has to tell you you’re wrong he’ll say to you upfront and in front of whomever, he’s much more spontaneous.
Since Victor’s experience with Canadian schooling is so different than his mother’s in Ecuador or even his, Brenda had some questions about the practices and policies of the school. One of her main concerns was that Victor did not have a lot of homework that would continue to further his study skills as a student during his time at home. She describes her observations on this matter:

But what I don’t like is that they don’t expect the kids to be responsible. There was no projects, no homework, they had absolutely nothing to study, nothing to read, nothing to do really…I see kids here that if they want to do their homework they do and if not they don’t. They don’t take their homework to school; they don’t even take their notebooks, nothing!

She decided to take her concerns to Victor’s teacher to which she received the following response:

He told me that system here was like that. Because I was asking, “Why is there no homework, don’t they assign him any?” So he would say to me, “No, no we don’t require that from the children” he would say and I would say to myself then where is the accountability of the child to learn, to try and learn more. “When they are older the time will come for those things.” So I would say well that’s the way it is here, what I am going to do about it.

Although Brenda provides individual support to her son that complements his experience at school, she would like to be more involved at her son’s school, however, she faces barriers to this type of involvement. She explains her desire to participate and the challenges that present themselves:

I think that the relationship is one simply of support and complement for my son in his home education with the development of his duties, in providing support for his assignments. I would like to participate more, be more participatory but unfortunately because of my limited time I haven’t been able to. To do some volunteering, I don’t know, to try to get involved in the arts since I enjoy art because of my career. Or I don’t know when they had programs and activities or
at the library I don’t know helping them organize or helping out with the children. But because of my time and my work it is very challenging.

Unlike her experience in Ecuador Brenda feels that she does not have an opportunity to connect with other parents in the school. Cultural and language differences also pose a challenge to connecting with other parents and often leaves her feeling like she has to navigate the new system on her own. She explains:

I didn’t know any other Latino parents, most of them were Canadian or from other places, mostly Muslims, additionally I didn’t speak English. I felt very very strange so I isolated myself too much. So what can I tell you that is an experience too-to not be able to understand how things happen, how thing work and you realize that it’s not that same as what you were doing in your country, I mean what your child was learning in your country.

Brenda places great importance on her son’s education. She defines education as more than academic knowledge and rather as a personal and social developmental endeavor to which home and family make a significant contribution. She states:

Education is very important because it allows you to develop firstly as a human being. You have education from the moment you are born. You are educated, you are taught to walk, to comb your hair, you are taught and this is part of your life. It’s part of the real process of life, of your growth and development. So it’s not that I am educated because I go to school because I have to, I go to school because I have to and I go to university because I am forced to. I think that someone who has learned to be educated from the beginning, from the education that your parents provided, from your parents upbringing it’s all an educative process and as you develop it is a process in which you are learning and developing as a person.

I think that at the level of culture it allows you to develop culturally as a human being, as a society, participating within that society too. So I think that it,
education, plays a very important role because education is something that you have everywhere beginning in your home.

This view of education influences what she would like her son to achieve through his education which is a combination of academic proficiency for career purposes and also personal and social development. She shares her aspirations for him:

I think that as an individual, a professional, I think the greatest thing would be to see my son as a professional. With his career and a profession and to see him being able to maintain himself independently. I don’t want him to leave me too soon but I would like and I want to accomplish that goal of providing him with a profession. Yes, so that later on he can be someone who does good, someone who can serve usefully.

Responsible, grateful, having respect towards others and himself. Someone who considers the positive and negative aspects of people and who is developing positively towards a future, who is constantly seeking growth.

As a parent she would also like to see her son achieve more than she has accomplished as an adult. She explains:

I would like him to someone good, to be somebody. I think that they main thing for a parent is to see their child overcome. And if they can accomplish more than their parents that is even better.

In order to ensure that Victor develops positively towards these goals Brenda places much importance on the cultivation of her son’s self esteem. She finds that at times this is in conflict with the educational experience of many children. She explains why this is so important to her:

His self-esteem, cultivating his self esteem because I think that we are all born with values and principles and your values many times because of teachers’ attitudes you begin to lose them. In that moment, you doubt what you know or what you possess or what you can do. If you are always told you are useless or
you can’t do this or your are good for nothing, which are things that you hear a lot, then these are phrases that get stuck in your mind and you begin to see and stop doing certain things that that maybe you could do but you didn’t, you didn’t try because our parents or our educators make it their job to tell us that we are no good for that. That isn’t building self-esteem in a child. No, instead it’s lowering their self-esteem and if we go through life hearing that what do we do make of our children?

Ideally, she would like to collaborate with the school and have the school support her in her efforts to provide a moral and cultural education for her child. She understands and values their participation but finds that at times her values are at odds with the school and the culture promoted there. She speaks about this discrepancy:

Unfortunately, like I’ve explained to you the kind of education here is not one that helps, that helps to cultivate these principles. They don’t get involved in the process of education, of manners in children. It’s rare to find a teacher who says, “Sit still, don’t do that, control yourself or respect this or that”, no one says that. And it’s not even, not even because they don’t know better but rather because people lack the desire to learn good manners and to teach their children good manners. I think that everyone has their own home customs but they don’t teach these to children at school or they don’t want to interfere in that part of people’s lives. The fact that every child comes from a different culture, different ethnic group with different upbringing makes each child totally different. So what I notice is that they are like they can do whatever they want, I’m not the parent. I’m not responsible for how they are.

Despite these differences Brenda has made strident efforts to impart her values to her son and has been successful. This becomes evident in his understanding of the purpose of education and his future goals as he expresses them. Victor believes that his education will allow him as he grows up to reach his highest potential as a human being as a professional and as a parent. He explains that the purpose of his education will be:
So that when I am an adult, I can be a better adult. So that some day if I have children I can share my experiences with them I mean what school is like or what it was like. And to help my children sometimes with school. When they have some, some kind of homework to help them and as they grow up with their assignments and all that. And like to have, to no be fighting with their wives or that kind of thing. To teach the children good manners and to have a good job and that.

As he grows up he would like to integrate all of the areas of his identity and continue to be a better son, student and in general human being that helps others and that practices the values that his family has instilled in him. He explains:

What I would like to accomplish is to be a better son, to be a better student. To help everyone in whatever way I can. To be very helpful.

Both Brenda and Victor expressed that one of their goals for the future is to complete their family. Victor explains what this might look like for his mother:

If maybe one day she can have someone beside her who can care for her and help her and who can be her partner.

Brenda further explains what they mean by a complete family:

I think that this is a goal that or the dream that I think Victor has, of having a father, a father figure in the home. To have a brother or sister at least, to have siblings and a family at home and well I think that is a goal too…Yes I think that is one of our goals to be able to make to have a complete family, not a family of 2 but a family of many members.

Both Brenda and Victor are determined to succeed and achieve their goals. Although there are some questions about how long they will pursue their goals in Canada, Brenda is certain that the 2 things which bring her the most hope about the future will follow her wherever she goes. These are:
First, God; second, the desire to continue to struggle and the reason I have to struggle which is my son. I know that whatever I set out to do, I accomplish.
Chapter 8
Discussion

The families who participated in this study provide a snapshot of the conceptions and practices of parent involvement that Latin American families engage in within the context of schooling in Toronto. Like the rest of the Latin American community in Toronto, their internal diversity is complex and nuanced almost overshadowing the fact that they have been through the experience of migration from the same part of the world. Nevertheless, in their difference there are also shared moments of experience which connect their unique stories. In this chapter, I will examine and explore these commonalities against the backdrop of their unique lives. I will focus on shared ways in which the families’ conceptualize parent involvement in education as described in their life histories and how they each enacted this involvement in their own way. I will situate these practices within the life histories including their experiences of education prior to migrating both for parents and students and discuss challenges and barriers to their enactments within the research context. Finally, I will locate the emerging conceptions and practices from the data in this study within the existing literature and policy in the field highlighting areas of alignment and tension with these findings.

This study began by posing questions about parent involvement among Latin American families in Toronto schools. As the families shared their stories through participating in this study and as the analysis progressed common ideas and practices of parent involvement emerged within the diverse experiences of these families. Additionally, these factors reflect existing ideas about parent involvement among minority parents in the literature while also challenging and stretching existing policy and practice around parent involvement within the research context. The parents in this study conceptualize themselves as actors within their children’s education developing certain roles. Ideas about education and practices related to it are connected to these roles and enacted by them and their children. The families in this study understand and enact parent involvement in education in the following ways which I address in this chapter:

- Parents as Protagonists: Defining Education
8.1 Parents as Protagonists: Defining Education

From the life histories shared through their participation in this project, the Suarez-Madarriaga, Ventura-Cruz and Vasquez-Mejia families identified parent involvement as an act of defining education for their children. All 3 families expressed clear and unique definitions of education that incorporated both academic learning as well as social and moral training. From this definition of education the families then defined their children’s individual experience of education including key elements and outcomes of these experiences. Parents defined education on their own terms based on their previous experiences and aspirations for their children; defined what the desired end result of their children’s educational experience would produce for their children and defined what was worth learning as part of this experience including both academic knowledge and cultural values and principles. Their children corroborated the definitions that their parents expressed thus signaling the communication of these definitions from one generation to the next as a key practice of this concept of parent involvement.

Parents in this study expressed particular understandings and definitions of education while sharing their life histories. In other words their understanding of what “an education” is within the context of their experience was elicited. Several connected themes emerged in the participants’ definitions of education. The participants in the study defined education as extending beyond academic preparation and therefore beyond the space of school.

All the parents when questioned about the purpose of education in the life on an individual pointed to the both academic learning and individual learning. The latter aspect included elements of social development, moral and ethical development and personal development.

For Fernando education is moral and social development in addition to academic. He speaks about the desired effects of education in critiquing the Cuban education
experience. It is confounding to him how an education experience which is recognized as one of the best in the world can result in individuals which possess what he deems poor moral and social mores. He is wary of exposing his daughter to this education within the home of a Cuban classmate since he feels he should determine the kind of education that she receives. For his wife Estela, education is a value added element of any individual’s life. She believes that education is a necessary part of the human experience for the purpose of self-development and ongoing improvement. Education is a lifelong endeavor, for everyone.

Brenda also sees education as a lifelong endeavor that begins from the moment someone is born. She believes it encompasses personal development including the instruction of social and cultural habits as well as moral standards. For her education is what allows you to function in a variety of spheres in society including school, work, family and society at large.

For Elena education is indispensable for the purpose of a person’s professional development. It is the added advantage that allows individuals to succeed in a very competitive environment like the one she finds herself and her family in. Elena of all the parents placed the most emphasis on this professional aspect of education. Given her context in the banking sector and her own admission of her fierce competitive nature and desire to succeed this is understandable. Her husband Ernesto clearly articulates the dual function of education as a tool for personal development as well as intellectual development through the academic aspect of it.

In evaluating schools where their children attended, parents examined both the academic rigor or lack thereof as well as the social and moral climate that existed and was cultivated. The Ventura-Cruz family recalled that early in their son’s schooling they removed him from a very prestigious school in Quito because although the pedagogy there was avant garde they saw that the moral and social climate that was being cultivated did not align with their own values. They appreciated the school that they placed him in subsequently and also the schools he attended in Canada because these aligned with their moral and religious values. Fernando and Estela also expressed
valuing the schools that their son attended for being academically rigorous but also supportive of their Catholic faith and its teachings. Finally, Brenda in evaluating her son’s preparation before attending school in Canada mentions that his social and moral foundations were much stronger as a result of the education he received in his country of origin. She critiques the lack of emphasis that is placed on the instruction of these elements within her experiences in the Canadian education system.

8.2 Beyond School-Centric

The broader concept of education was one that was not located exclusively within the site of school. For those with high levels of formal schooling (Technical, Undergraduate and Graduate Studies) such as Brenda, Elena, Estela and Ernesto the home site was very important in their own experiences as students at all levels of schooling. With their own children, the parents expressed the importance alignment between home and school to achieve the broader goals of education as they defined it. For those with more limited formal schooling like Fernando, education included life experience that can occur in any context which an individual embodies and most importantly within the home.

For these parents education is an endeavor extending beyond simply academic knowledge and beyond the school site. This element of education that extends beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge is the more complex concept of educación that is described in Valdes (1996) and Villenas and Dehyle, (1999). It involves a process of acquiring academic knowledge as well as moral foundations and standards of social relations. Since this education is broader than traditional notions of simply academic schooling it necessitates a strong partnership between home and school. This relationship however extends beyond the traditional notion of parent involvement which is school centric both in its location and purposes (Lawson 2003). Instead, it fits into Lawson’s (2003) concept of community centric parent involvement which is not located exclusively within the school and works towards broader aims of community improvement through development of student strengths. The parents in this study clearly subscribe to this broader concept of education and this influences their ideas about their role as parents within education as will be discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.
Parent involvement for the participant families of this project includes defining education including its purposes and outcomes for their children. There are a number of practices related to this concept of parent involvement that parents enact within the educational experience of their children. For the participants in this project two practices of parent involvement related to this conception of parent involvement will be discussed in the following section: setting expectations and cultivating and maintaining cultural values.

8.3 Setting the Bar: The Practice of Setting High Expectations

All the parents in this study set high expectations for the education of their children. Mothers and fathers both expressed a desire for their children to achieve certain goals that they have set for them. These high expectations are evident in the aspirations that parents’ expressed for the future of their children. All the child participants are expected to enter Post-Secondary Education preferably university and complete professional degrees that will facilitate the acquisition of secure employment in a field where they can find fulfillment and the possibility of upward social mobility.

The social mobility that parents desired for their children to achieve was not simply within the larger social context but rather in relation to the parents’ achievements both in the country of origin and within Canada. Parents saw their children’s education as a means for them to supersede their own achievements both professionally and educationally. The Ventura-Cruz parents who had achieved undergraduate and graduate degrees in their field in their home country aspired for their children to achieve graduate professional degrees in Business and Medicine, thereby overtaking both of their achievements. Brenda would like to see her son enter his profession of choice and be able to practice this profession to its full scope. Fernando expressed that he would like his son to complete Post-Secondary education and value this experience since he did not value his educational opportunities. Estela also wants her son to appreciate his educational opportunities and achieve the aspirations of completing university that she has for him.
These expectations set out by parents are rooted in the experience of immigration from their country of origin to Canada. Migration for many parents is most often closely associated with a desire to provide educational opportunities for their children that they and their children might not have otherwise had (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; James 2008). Parents expressed a desire for their children to obtain certain credentials as a result of their education that would facilitate their entry into the Canadian labor market. For the Ventura-Cruz family for example a large motivator in migrating was to provide their children with a North American education with English as the language of instruction that would make them more competitive within the labor market. For the Suarez-Madarriaga family who arrived as involuntary immigrants due to having to flee their country for safety, education was not a factor in their decision to migrate but was a pressing concern once they arrived in Canada and within their children’s experience it was viewed as a means to avoid the precarious employment and financial struggles that they family has faced as immigrants. Similarly for Brenda and her son, although she did not emigrate for reasons related to her son’s education, she did express the high expectations that she had for the educational experience of her son post-migration. As an internationally trained professional who is not able to practice within her field within a Canadian context the connection between a particular educational experience and entry into the labor market is very relevant to her.

8.4 Communicating High Expectations

While parents set these high expectations for their children an important element of the practice of involvement is communicating these expectations to their children. Evidence that these expectations are communicated to the children is notable in the children’s expressions of their goals for the future and their understanding of the purpose of education which align very closely with their parents. Ernesto Jr. and Juan echoing their parents acknowledged that one the main motivators for their family’s migration was for them to acquire an education that would lead to employment in a job that was fulfilling and would provide for a comfortable life. Francisco expressed to his mother on several occasions, as noted in her life history, that he wanted to avoid the financial hardships that his family endured. His parents advised him to be diligent in his education so that he
could get a good job and he echoed that desired trajectory in his own life history. Victor also viewed one of the goals of education as getting a good job. Both Francisco and Victor in speaking about good jobs qualified these as jobs that were comfortable and well paying, in other words not in the service industry or heavy labor like the jobs they were familiar with their parents having in Canada.

The act of communicating these expectations to their children is a key element of the conception and practices of parent involvement for these families. The participant families engage in practices consistent with the existing literature on the topic to communicate these expectations. These practices include giving their children consejos (Delgado-Gaitan 1994) and exposing them to hard work (Lopez 2001) to support the achievement of their goals.

Consejos are pieces of nurturing advice (Delgado-Gaitan 1994). These pieces of advice are shared by parents with children to communicate and reinforce the educational goals that exist for each child. When Francisco expresses to his mother his desire to not endure financial hardships as his parents have she lovingly tells him to keep up with his studies so that he can have a better future. Fernando, his father also tells him about the importance of keeping up with his studies so that he can get a good job in the future. Through their words they communicate to their son the expectations they have of him as well as the positive end results that this will produce.

Elena in her life history emphasizes that this act of communicating their expectations to their children is a recurring and constant practice. She speaks about repeating to her children what the expectations are for them and assuring them through her words that they are capable of reaching these goals.

### 8.5 Exposing Children to Hard Work

Another technology used to reinforce their high expectations involves exposing the children to hard work in order to teach them the value of an education. This exposure occurs either through exposing them to the challenges that parents face in working difficult jobs to make ends meet or through encouraging older children to take on part-
time work during school. Through this exposure to hard work it is hoped that children will learn the value of their education and as such achieve the expectations that their parents have of them. Fernando believes that his children have witnessed some of the difficult financial and other struggles that he has endured as an immigrant and through this experience will prioritize education as a means to avoid repeating those experiences. He also speaks about sharing his experience in various jobs which have been very strenuous and where he felt he was mistreated because of his low level of formal education. Francisco has confirmed to his parents that he would like to avoid some of the struggles particularly around finances that his parents have endured. His parents encourage him that continuing with his education will ensure that this happens. Lopez (2001) has documented this aspect of Latino parent involvement among parents working in agricultural labour in the United States. Like Fernando, these parents expose their children to their own experiences of hard work while also motivating their children to stay in school and avoid having to take on survival jobs in the 2nd generation.

Elena employs this same technology but with a variation given her class status. As part of the wave of professional migration from Latin America, Elena is employed in a position that would not be considered low level labour. Although she is not at the same level as she would have been in her country of origin, she is financially comfortable level and working in her field. Early on in her migration experience, people in her network encouraged her to take on low level labour positions but as part of the new professional migrant class she was committed to working her way up in her own field. Her children, have witnessed and heard from her how hard their mother works and the position that she had to give up to migrate. Nevertheless, Elena wants to inculcate in them the value of an education and so she exposes them to hard work directly. In her life history she shares how she arranged for her son, Ernesto Jr., to be a banquet server in her friend’s catering business. She did this to encourage her son to find part-time work since she felt it was important for him to learn the responsibilities of having of job while also experiencing the kinds of jobs he could acquire with only a high school education. With this first gruelling experience and his later position as a Sales Associate at an office supplies store Elena achieved her objective since her son came to the conclusion that without an education one must work in whatever can be found in an effort to survive and provide for
one’s family. He made it clear to his parents that this is not the experience he would like to have. For the Ventura-Cruz family whose oldest son is about to enter university at the time of this work, it has been a long, but fruitful process to set high expectations for his education.

Brenda in her life history did not speak about using either of these technologies to communicate to her son the expectations that she had for him. Although during her interview and the focus group with her and her son, she expressed that she would like him to achieve a post secondary professional degree which he also echoed as a goal, she did not go into detail about how she communicated these to her son. Nevertheless, Victor expressed many of the same aspirations as his mother in his personal interview and the focus group thus signaling the fact that these aspirations are being inculcated in Victor. One way to explain the absence of these communication tools in Brenda’s life history might be her more recent arrival in Canada and the challenging time she has had in finding adequate work. She speaks about the frustration of having achieved high levels of education in her country of origin at great sacrifice and having to take on menial jobs in Canada to survive. The mismatch between her education and the goals she has for herself and her family are dissonant and this might explain the lack of use of consejos and exposure to hard work in her communication of the expectations for her son. The dissonance that she is experiencing between her own educational preparation and the kinds of jobs that she has had to take is not something that she would want to communicate to her son as this might negatively affect his views on education and discourage him from pursuing achievement within this arena.

8.6 Levelling the Playing Field

James (2008) makes an observation about what immigrant parents’ high expectations connected to education say about their views of the immigration and settlement experience for their children. He writes:

For the most part, recognizing their limited economic means by which they might be able to realize the “better” life for themselves and/or their children, parents come to place their hopes and confidence in education which they think will
enable their children to effectively negotiate the racist structures that, without a high level of education could be an insurmountable barrier to realizing their economic and social ambitions. Parents seem to think that on the basis of merit and with the necessary education their children will be able to access the job or career to which they aspire. It is not that parents think inequality and racism do not exist but they believe their skin colour becomes less relevant once their children who, unlike them, were born in the country and are Canadians, “are educated”. (p. 117)

For the families in this study race or skin colour as James (2008) puts it was not the only factor of difference that influenced the parents’ experience. As Latin Americans other factors such as immigration status, last name, mother tongue, accent and cultural values set the parents apart and presented barriers to achieving their own aspirations. For this reason, they have placed a high value on education for their children with the belief that these factors will become less relevant in the experience of their children allowing them to achieve their aspirations.

8.7 Parents’ Experiences as Students and High Expectations

Parents’ life histories also revealed that they engaged in this practice of parent involvement in setting high standards because of their own educational experiences as children and the educational experiences of their children in their country of origin. Brenda, Elena and Estela all identified themselves as high achieving students in their education in their country of origin, thus their desire to see their children achieve is part of a family culture of achievement. All the parents in speaking about their children’s education in their home country identified that their children were moderate to high achievers and thus expected that this continue in their new context of schooling. These practices then are informed by the unique lived experiences of each of the participants and may not necessarily fit into one cultural way of involving parents either based on their ethnic grouping, individual school cultures or broadly applied policy.
8.8 High Expectations and Schools

This practice of parent involvement, however, was not met without resistance. Elena found that the guidance counsellor at her son’s school was not communicating the same message of very high expectations to her son. She found that by encouraging him to enter the skilled trades, this guidance counsellor was in fact setting low expectations for her son which were not what she and her husband wanted. This sent mixed messages to her son and created a difficult experience for the family in which friction was created between their expectations and his. For Elena the school did not act as an ally in setting these high expectations for her child. She explains this difference in expectations as cultural understandings of what children can achieve and a difference in attitudes towards achievement. She believes the school’s Canadian approach is much more *laissez-faire* than her Latin American approach which values struggle and hard work on the road to achievement. Elena also expressed that she felt excluded from the decision making process when it came to goal setting for her son. Her view is that the Canadian school systems views Secondary School students, since they are older, as capable of making informed decisions on their own without parental guidance. This is not her cultural belief of child rearing and as such she felt unsupported in being involved in this aspect of her children’s education.

Fernando expressed feeling the same, unsupported, in reviewing his child’s progress and planning the next steps in his trajectory to achieving his goals. When his son’s 3rd term report card conference was not rescheduled and no one at the school made an attempt to speak with him about his son’s progress and areas of success and challenge, Fernando felt at a loss. He emphasized that it is not the same for children to report on their own success in place of the main caregivers (parents and teachers) discussing a student’s progress.

Like with Elena and Fernando, Brenda feels that the school system in Canada does not support her in providing an education for her son that emphasizes certain values. She believes the school shies away from doing this because they do not want to interfere in the diverse values that each student might bring to the classroom from her or his own home culture.
The conflict between parents’ views of their role in setting high expectations for their children and the school’s resistance of this signals the tension that this practice of parent involvement elicits. Parents expressed feeling as if goal setting that takes place within the school site often excludes parents and leaves them uninformed of their children’s trajectory therefore limited in their ability to support the achievement of these goals particularly as students enter higher levels of schooling (elementary to secondary). The parent participants in this study very clearly express their desire to be key actors in the setting of expectations for their children’s education and by way of that reclaiming the protagonist role in their children’s education.

This practice could be a powerful tool to support the change and improvement in education since as Fullan (1982) notes parents are very invested in programs and changes that affect their own children. Harnessing parents’ desire to be involved in setting high expectations for their children in their education could be creatively included within the existing policy framework. This would require a rethinking of how schools connect to parents and for what purpose. Fundamentally, it would also alter the way that schools frame parents. Parents would not be able to be approached as a monolithic entity (Gordon & Nocon 2008) but rather as individual actors with aspirations for their children that are rooted in their unique experiences and values. It would also mean challenging blanket assumptions about parents’ aspirations for their children such as parents’ with low levels of formal education having low expectations for their children. It would be necessary to address what Moles (1998) identifies as one of the obstacles to involvement for minoritized parents: Psychological and cultural barriers such as misperceptions and misunderstandings based on previous negative experiences or differences in cultural practices. It would also require that the aspirational capital of parents no matter their position in life be acknowledged and valued within the institution of school (Yosso 2006). Finally, schools would have to relinquish the reins to parents as the key actors in determining the goals and trajectory of their children (Cutler 2000; Wolfendale 2002). Rather than simply including the student in this process schools would have to creatively find avenues in which to include parents in the conversation while continuing to include the student voice and the support of school-based actors.
8.9 The Latin American Way: The Practice of Cultivating and Maintaining Values

Connected to the parent participants’ definition of education as an academic and cultural endeavor is the emphasis in their discourse on cultivating and maintaining certain cultural values. While parents desire for their children to be successful within their educational experience in Canada is evident in the high expectations they have for their achievement they do not want this success to come at the expense of the values they have tried to inculcate in their children. The values that were identified were not the same for each of the families; which is to be expected as the grouping of individuals for whom Latin American is a central identity is somewhat arbitrary. As Hidalgo (1998) notes the grouping of people from South and Central America as a minority ethnic group based on a shared language (Spanish), (some aspects of) shared culture and a colonial history with Spain is a somewhat flexible delineation. Nevertheless, the importance of having their children maintain certain home values were expressed by all the parent participants in this study. Some of the values that emerged as important to maintain as part of their children’s upbringing: included standards of morality, religious faith, hard work, *familismo*, home language and cultural practices. James (2008) explains how parents desire to maintain these values in their children is closely connected to their educational aspirations for them:

…immigrant parents try to instill in their children attitudes and values… Parents hope that they psychological, social and cultural capital will keep their children rooted in their parents values and ambitions, focused in their education and career goals and not adapt of conform to the Canadian values of “adulterization” where children operate independent of their parents, or to the oppositional youth culture…

Furthermore, he points out that a challenge for many parents is convincing their children that the maintenance of cultural values will sustain and support them in their educational endeavors. This is where the school could support the work of parents of minority children.
8.10 *Familismo* and Foreign Culture

*Familismo* stands out as a central value that all families mentioned and which is unique to the cultural group. *Familismo* refers to the strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity and solidarity that individual members of Latino families have towards their immediate and extended family as well as the centrality of family to individuals’ lives (Pereira et al. 2007). Ernesto articulates clearly the fear that 2nd generation immigrant children will lose the cultural foundations and particularly their relationships with their parents and family as they become further embedded within the Canadian cultural context including achieving high levels of education. He views the early independence from parents and lack of interdependency even among adult children and their families that is part of Canadian culture as something which he does not desire for his own children and grandchildren in the future.

Brenda expressed the same concern. For her it emerged as a contradiction where she wants her son to be very successful and develop as a professional, however, she doesn’t want to lose him too quickly or at all to this endeavour. She clearly acknowledges the connection between achieving higher levels of education and the distance that this might create between her and her son.

Parents also feared that in aligning with the dominant culture of the home nation their children would be “lost” and forsake the values of their parents and families. All the parents expressed serious criticisms of what they perceived to be the cultural values of the dominant culture. These were precisely the values that they did not want their children to acquire. Estela spoke about the lack of moral values that she has observed among North American youth and that she is wary of her son and daughter adopting. After a misunderstanding with Francisco’s behavior at school over an inappropriate image on a notebook from Colombia, Estela and her family in Colombia made the point that North American youth are involved in much more damaging behaviors from which they are trying to protect their children. Elena also outlined some of the specific values which she views as part of Hispanic culture and which she feels her children cannot afford to lose. These include: respecting and supporting elderly parents, maintaining close family ties and the importance of chastity in romantic relationships.
8.11 Aligning Home and School

Due to the importance parents place in maintaining these values it was imperative that there be alignment between the values of the home and those promoted at school. This was a key practice in their description of parent involvement practices in their home country. In their country of origin the enactment of this practice was related to school choice. Ernesto clearly explained how in Ecuador parents choose the schools their children attend within their means regardless of their geographic location that is the case in Canada. This meant that parents’ choice was influenced by the evaluation of the school and the values that it promoted in its culture. The Ventura-Cruz family chose to relocate their son on the basis of what they felt was the incompatible moral and social climate of his first school. Elena emphasized the importance for parents to have schools align with their values even above the academic aspects of school. Shared values between home and school were a more important factor that school prestige or perceived academic rigor.

Similarly, the Suarez-Madarriaga family valued the schools which shared a moral and religious alignment with their family and mirrored their own experience as students. In speaking about their son’s experience in Colombia from a very early age they placed him in a school that aligned with their moral and religious beliefs and which they felt promoted similar values to their home training.

Brenda had some differences with the values promoted in her son’s school in Ecuador in particular with a certain teacher. She was very vocal about the values that were important to her and that she wanted to encourage in her son including a love for learning and the value of trying your best above achieving a certain grade. She made this clear to the teacher in question after she took actions in the classroom that contradicted these values. As a result of this episode Brenda grew increasingly disenamored with this particular school until shortly before migrating to Canadian she placed her son in another school which was more closely aligned with her values and where his cousins were attending thus adding an additional layer of security that the school was a family ally.
Within a Canadian context where school choice is more closely governed by geography parents still expressed the desire to maintain certain values as part of their children’s education. This can be explained by the broader definition of education for these parents that includes both academic and personal, moral and cultural development that occurs within both school and home sites. Brenda explained the kind of education that she would like her son to have begins in the home and goes out from there into other sites including school. Therefore collaboration between home and school is vital if education is to be achieved. Fernando explained how this broader concept of education demands that there be collaboration between home and school as the educational project is not merely academic nor merely moral or cultural. For him a lack of collaboration between home and school and the principal actors at each site is a great disservice to the education of children since both should be working to develop the best possible students and human beings together. Fernando also grounds this broader conception of education within his own unique educational experience in which he acknowledges his parents roles as moral role models and teachers which contributed to the his personal moral development. Elena believes that the home school relationship is critical to her children’s success particularly because of her experience when the school is promoting a different set of values around hard work and effort and this conflicts with her family’s views on these matters.

8.12 Mismatched Values

If this conception of education is to be operationalized schools must collaborate with parents in order to communicate and cultivate these values among 2nd generation students. Unfortunately, the experience for families in this study has been one in which they find that their values are either at odds with those of the school or misunderstood by them. Parents expressed disappointment at the fact that schools did not engage as partners in this project of cultivating and maintaining values for their children that would allow them to belong within their own culture. While parents understood that students would adopt a bicultural identity, they did not feel as if the school was supportive of this process of becoming for their young people. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) identified broader more holistic goals of education for 2nd generation students which included the fostering of a strong bicultural identity, the cultivation of strong families and the strengthening of
communities. These are the goals that parents in this study desire to promote through the maintenance of values but which they feel are in conflict with the role ascribed to them within the Canadian schooling system and the values it promotes. Parents involved themselves in the education of their children by attempting to cultivate and maintain these values through home education even as they felt schools thwarted their efforts.

This mismatch can be explained by the difference in expected outcomes of education and parental involvement in education contained within the official discourse versus within parents’ discourse. The official discourse is what Lawson (2003) would call school-centric parent involvement that is practices that are engaged in serving the best interests of the schools this may be in the service of students positive school experience as well but does not extend often beyond the identity of students as academic learners. In contrast to this he also describes what parents in the community where he conducted his research valued as parent involvement which was community-centric in nature. That is to say collaboration between homes and schools that would serve the whole student, families and communities. The desire of parents in this study to have schools support the development of a healthy bi-cultural identity in their children complete with the maintenance of cultural values matches this community-centric model of parent involvement.

The oldest student participant in this study was the only one who expressed the conflict between the cultural demands of his family and the cultural demands of his new context. He emphasized the challenge that this presents for him in having to bridge the two worlds and in having to explain to actors in each this challenge.

His parents also corroborate this challenge in the way in which they describe their efforts at cultivating and maintaining certain cultural values as a struggle. The use of the word struggle signals the great effort and intentional work that cultivating and maintaining these values entails. James (2008) explains the challenge that schools encounter in supporting students and parents in this endeavor. In his work with Black Caribbean students he finds that schools often exacerbate the distance that exists in terms of cultural
values between parents and students. This is consistent with the experiences of the families who participated in this study. He explains:

The issues of social and cultural differences and distance between parents and children is not only mediated by familial relationships, but also is structured by the racializing and inequitable schooling process in which African Canadian students participate. Specifically, being schooled in a system that fails to recognize the cultural capital that black students bring to their educational process means that schools are likely to exacerbate rather than ameliorate (by helping students to understand the cultural context from which they come) the differences between parents and children.

This analysis can be extrapolated to the experiences of Latin American students and their families in this study. The neglecting of students’ cultural capital that they bring to the schooling experience including the values that their parents are trying cultivate within their homes acts to alienate students from their families and in turn families from schools. Schools then function as an actor that thwarts the development of those cultural values and negatively effects the education and outcome of students by excising the parents from this key role.

In examining how this practice of parent involvement fits within the official discourse of parent involvement it is evident that there is not a lot of room for its development. Parent involvement policy invites parents to be involved on the schools’ terms (Wolfendale 2002) as opposed to inviting parents to help define what involvement might look like. Furthermore it constructs parents from a deficit perspective (Nakagawa 2000; Lubeck and Devries 2000) which obviously precludes schools from recognizing the importance of the cultural values that are promoted within the site of home (Yosso 2006). Until schools begin to construct parents and particularly minority parents in a different light this unique practice of parent involvement which parents are calling for will not be part of the discourse on parent involvement. James (2008) referring to Yosso’s (2006) work asserts that if schools continue to devalue minority unique cultural capital than the distance between generations of students and parents will continue alienating students
lacking key elements of their identity and leaving schools unable to engage students in meaningful ways.

8.13 Parents as Advocates: Defending Education

Participants in this study conceptualized parent involvement as a function of advocacy. Parents stood in the gap for their children in a number of situations throughout their schooling. This role of advocacy was for the purpose of defending their children at times but more importantly served to defend the kind of educational experiences that parents expected that their children would have. When advocating for their children it was not based on the blind belief in the inherent goodness of their children but rather enacted as a mechanism to ensure that they would emerge from the educational process unscathed by the threats to their identity, well-being and future that school can often produce.

All of the participant families encountered situations in their children’s schooling wherein they had to approach the school on behalf of their children. For the Suarez-Madariaga family it occurred when their son was reprimanded by the school’s administration for his actions that were misunderstood as well as when their daughter was being mistreated by another student and was refused bussing transportation because of the geographic boundaries. For the Ventura-Cruz family it occurred when Ernesto Jr.’s post-secondary future was in jeopardy and when Juan was avoiding attending school. For the Vazquez-Mejia family it was when Victor was being bullied by his classmates at school. Although each of these situations was unique there are shared elements which illuminate how parents view their role in the education of their children.

8.14 Defending Children: The Family as a Resource in Education

When challenging the school in advocating for their children’s education parents in this study clearly connect the necessary moment of conflict to the long term outcomes of their children’s educational experiences. Since the home site and family are key part of their conception of education, parents were invested in defending relationships and family ties that would support the education of their children in the present and future.
When Brenda had to demand that the school administration take action regarding the bullying her son was being subjected to at school she was not only ensuring his safety at school but communicating to her son that she was an important ally in his life thus strengthening the parent-child relationship which would continue to be a source of strength and affirmation throughout his life and in his education. Her role as an advocate in this situation was not only for the purpose of addressing the problem of bullying but also addresses the emotional and physiological safety that she as a mother could provide her son even in the face of other’s attacks on his person.

Estela was also concerned with strengthening her relationship as a parent with her son by standing up for him when his behaviour was brought into question because of a misunderstanding. She differed from her husband in this regard as she wanted to show her son that she was an ally in his defence and not simply siding with school authorities who had misread his actions. As she puts it, she wanted her son to feel supported and not opposed to by his parents.

When Elena went to the school to inquire about Juan’s experience that was making him not want to go to school, she went with the understanding that the relationship between her and her son was one based on honesty and openness. In her recounting of this story she mentions how important it is for parents to know their children and what is going on with them thus emphasizing the importance of the familial relationship to the education experience.

8.15 Defending Education: Protecting and Promoting Educación

When parents advocated on behalf of their children they were also defending the kind of educational experience that they desired for their children. It has already been established that parents had certain notions and definitions of education and thus the experiences within this concept of education are specific to their understanding. Parents defended the kinds of the experiences that they felt should be afforded to their children in order to achieve their broader process of education. For example, when Estela was advised by the school that her street did not fall within the catchment area of
transportation to the school, she challenged and resisted this verdict. She wanted the best possible education for her daughter both within her country or origin and now in Canada and this included a consistent and stable experience, not changing schools part way through the year. She felt this would be too disruptive and felt that the suggestion that she do that from the school signaled their lack of care for her daughter’s experience. She was defending the personal and social aspect of her daughter’s education by ensuring continuity in the early days of schooling.

Similarly when Juan was avoiding attending school, Elena approached the teacher to advocate for a schooling experience for her son that was consistent with his needs and her views of the teacher-student relationship. She was very clear with the teacher about the discrepancies that she had seen in his behaviour and in a diplomatic way pointed to her teaching style as a possible source of these changes. In explaining the situation she acknowledged the sensitive nature of her son and the kind of instruction that might suit him best. Her advocacy was in defence of the kind of education that acknowledges students social and emotional development.

In each situation parents approached the school in defense of their children challenging decisions and practices that they viewed as affecting their children’s educational experience both at the school site and in the home. In one way they were defending the best interests and needs of their children as individuals but they were also defending their conception of education and their children’s experience of education. Lubeck and Devries (2002) conceptions of parents that exist within the discourse of parent involvement are useful in understanding this practice of parent involvement. They describe the double bind of parents as protector and parents as problem within this discourse. Parents are expected to be involved in supporting the school and it’s functions in serving students, however when parents challenge or question these functions or their outcomes they become problems in the educational project. This dichotomous understanding produces a simplistic understanding of home-school relations as either positive or problematic. Situations in which parents are challenging the schools decisions or practice then are seen as conflictive and thereby problematic. The parents in this study refute this dichotomy. Though they were challenging the school and its
decisions, it was not with the intent to create strife between the home and school sites but rather for the purpose of aligning these sites through ensuring their children’s experiences fit within their concept of education.

This kind of parent involvement was rooted in the previous experiences of parents in their home country. While their children were attending school in the country of origin parents had enacted their role as advocates within their educational experiences. In Colombia, Fernando and Estela had an experience wherein they requested that their son be placed in a certain class for the first grade. Although, they did not have to be as persistent in this instance, the act of advocacy had such an impact that it was noted by Francisco as he shared his life history. At the beckoning of his son, Fernando approached the teacher informally and outside of the school setting to request that his son be placed in her class. As a result of this Francisco was in that teacher’s class the following year.

Brenda also describes how she defended her son in the face of an accusation that he was cheating on a test and an act of humiliating discipline by his teacher in front of his classmates. While she was defending her son’s integrity since he had not been dishonest, more importantly she was asserting for the teacher her views on learning that didn’t fit into the existing pedagogical model in that school but that she desired her child to have. This itself was rooted in her own experience as a student which she admits was a stressful one because of the pressure that she put on herself to achieve regardless of the learning experience. She did not want the same experience for her son and thus challenged this teacher who she interpreted was valuing grades above learning. Victor was able to retake the test and scored well. Additionally, Brenda notes that the teacher’s attitude changed towards her and her son.

Ernesto and Elena also approached a teacher when they had some questions about the way their son was being unfairly disciplined for something he did not do. They acted quickly and spoke to the teacher in person. The situation was rectified and Ernesto Jr. was not held responsible for something he didn’t do.

All the parents in this study were familiar with acting as advocates on behalf of their children and their education as a result of their enactment of this role within their home
countries. Logic dictates that upon entering the Canadian school system this element of advocacy would be one that they would include in their parent involvement. As outlined parents did attempt to translate this practice into their Canadian experience but this was not without its challenges.

8.16 Barriers to Advocacy

Although the parents enacted practices of advocacy on behalf of their children’s education they faced significant barriers in doing so. These barriers were different depending on the situation and the actors within it. For Brenda and Estela their most significant barrier was their lack of language ability in English and the lack of translation provided by the school. Estela explained that when she had to go to the school with her husband to address the issue of his discipline she had a lot that she wanted to say. Her lack of English language ability however prevented her from saying anything in that meeting. Even when she felt her husband was not enacting his role as a parent advocate and she wanted to defend her son she was frustrated in this effort. She tried to express her concerns through her husband but he acted as a filter and shut down many of her comments and questions. Estela reported that this is also the case during report card time. Though she may have many questions about the report card that she could ask at the Parent-Teacher conference, she is left with all these questions for lack of a way to express them clearly to the teacher. Brenda had a similar experience when she went to the school and discovered that her son was being bullied. After repeated assaults on Victor and no resolution, Brenda approached the school to demand that the children harming her son be disciplined. In this process, her son’s behaviour and integrity in reporting these incidents was questioned. Brenda wanted to defend her son and explain that he was the victim but her lack of English language ability prevented her from doing so. She tried her best but ended up feeling frustrated and impotent at not being able to express her grievances to school officials. A barrier like the lack of translation to English for parents that act to prevent parents from effectively advocating for their children also function to represent minority parents in a negative light. Take for instance Elena and Brenda’s feelings of frustration and impotence at being able to communicate their wishes to the school. Their limited engagement with the school could be read as acts of passivity and
non-participation on their part. Yet although they may not be engaging outwardly with the school and its personnel, it is not because they do not wish to be. However, as De Gaetano (2007) notes formal approaches are often regarded as being the most effective and ethnic minority parents are pegged as rarely engaging in them leading educators to conclude that they are “uninvolved” and “uncaring” about their children’s education. The “blame” is placed on the parents rather than considering the avenues of access to the school and barriers which might exist for these parents.

Elena’s experience with advocating is slightly different and sheds light on another barrier that exists for parents to enact their role as advocates. Elena recounts a number of occasions on which she approached teachers and the guidance counselor regarding her sons’ educational experience. In these recounts there is little hint of her feeling like she lacks access to these individuals or anything like the frustration felt by Brenda and Estela. However, there is an incident she recalls early in her migration experience which mirrors their experience with the school system. When her oldest son first entered school she remembers watching him standing alone in the playground during recess. There wasn’t a peer or teacher to act as a buddy or guide and this made Ernesto Jr.’s first few days at his new school unbearable. So much so that many years later he shared with his mother the pain of those early days of isolation and rejection. As Elena watched this unfold and saw the damage that it was doing to her son socially and emotionally she felt the frustration and powerlessness that Brenda and Estela felt as well.

8.17 Parent Advocacy and Social Distance

One way to understand the divergences and convergences of these 3 mother’s experience is using the concept of social distance in relation to the school. Michael Fullan’s (1999) conception of the social distance that positions at different distances from the school because of their possession of certain values, practices and ideas can be applied here. His conception which borrows from Bourdieu’s analysis of the existence of cultural and social capital which influences the interactions of individuals and groups with social institutions is at play in the experiences of these families. For Brenda and Estela, new immigrants (under 3 years) and for Elena initially their language skills (or perceived lack thereof) and lack of knowledge about the system place them at a distance from the school
to the point that they even feel that there is a barrier. This barrier prevents them from enacting their role as advocates in their children's education. As Elena progresses in her language ability, this barrier is somewhat removed as she approaches the site of the school more closely in social distance. While this could simply be treated as an difficulty in language communication at a deeper level it is an immense challenge to the parents and students in being able to communicate their values to the school. How can they know if the values are shared or where they collide and how to mitigate these conflicts if communication is essentially blocked. Repeatedly, the lack of translators or any other support that could perhaps clear the lines of communication between these English as second language speaking parents and the school are mentioned. The absence of networks of parents who could communicate within a shared language and context is also present.

Notable as well is the social distance between home and school in parents’ interactions with school in their country of origin. The parents in this study did not mention feeling frustration or powerlessness at approaching the school and its personnel in their home country in their mother tongue. Of special note is Fernando’s level of comfort enacting the role of advocate in approaching the teacher in a social setting to make a request on behalf of his son. Parents and teachers found themselves socializing informally within the same venues on their off-time, and yet this time was also used to negotiate the very important issue of the children’s education. In other words the social distance that existed between the parents and school actors was not an onerous one.

This is not the case within Canadian context. For Fernando and Estela as new immigrants going through the refugee process and being working class status their experiences are far from that of the teachers and other actors at their children’s schools. The case is the same for Brenda as a single parent and new immigrant to Canada. This distance manifests itself in the cultural and social capital that they can wield to advocate for the education of their children. As Delgado-Gaitan (1991) argues children of parents who are well versed in the culture of school have a better chance of succeeding since their parents can act as advocates and supporters during their schooling process. She goes on to note that traditional avenues of parent involvement are not available to parents due
to their lack of knowledge of the cultural practices that was required to employ these avenues.

In the case of these 3 families this barrier is less notable for the Ventura-Cruz family. Their experience within Canada and the cultural codes that they have acquired through this experience place them at a nearer social distance to the school thus eliminating some of the barriers that the other parents experience. It should be noted that the distance however, cannot be attributed to an incompatibility of values. Repeatedly, all the families emphasized the importance of education, their desire for their children to succeed and their previous experiences in their home country with liaisoning, collaborating and challenging teachers in advocacy of their children. Their values would appear to be those that are shared with the white middle class values promoted within the school system. The barrier is created by the social distance between parents and schools which is predicated on issues of race, class, language, immigration status and other elements that LatCrit Theory has developed from CRT as elements which influence people of color experience within society.

8.18 Allies in Advocacy

In advocating for their children, parents often identified and relied on allies in the process of speaking back to power. These allies provided access to avenues and instruments to making their advocacy effective.

For the Suarez-Madarriaga family the settlement worker at their school facilitated their advocacy for bussing service for their daughter. After parent’s repeated attempts in person pleading for this exception to be made, she assisted them in using formal channels by writing a letter on their behalf requesting a re-examination of the decisions. She provided a cultural road map perse of the bureaucratic process that parents had to go through to have their voices heard. Estela in her life history comments on the different between home school relationships in her country and in Canada and notes much more bureaucracy in her experience with schools in Canada. Parents, like Fernando and Estela, may be accustomed to approaching the school in much more informal ways as part of their community and key allies in raising their children. The maze of bureaucracy that
exists in linking parents and schools might act as an insurmountable barrier to these parents without the help of a cultural guide, like Paullina.

For Brenda, the ally in her act of advocacy was her son’s teacher. He did not act as a cultural guide who unveiled the ways of being in the school system but rather used his own voice to lend legitimacy to her claims. When the administration doubted that her son was a victim of bullying and failed to understand Brenda’s call for action, the teacher stepped in and corroborated Brenda’s accounts of her son’s terrible experience. Brenda was able to make this teacher understand her in spite of the language barrier because since his partner was Mexican he could understand some Spanish. Although the teacher’s experience was not similar to Brenda’s he did have a connection to it through his parents, even if it was just language, and this facilitated his being able to act as an ally for her and Victor.

After Estela asserted herself as an advocate she found an unlikely ally in the guidance counselor. Despite their differences it was this guidance counselor who supported her in challenging her son to struggle for the high goals his parents had for him.

These allies were key in supporting the advocacy practices of the parents often by lending legitimacy to their voices within the institutional context and providing access to the institution through legitimized means.

This type of involvement is neither school centric nor does it fall within the traditional views of how parents should approach schools. These practices do fit, however, into De Gaetano’s (2007) conception of informal and formal parent involvement practices. All of these interactions with the schools were unstructured informal practices of parent involvement. However, as De Gaetano (2007) notes these practices are often viewed as inferior to more structured, formal practices such as parent-teacher interviews, helping with homework and communication from the school to home. In the same vein, Moosa et al (2007) point out that when parents engage in communicating with schools, the expectation is that they adhere to certain codes of speech that are acceptable within the dominant culture. When parents fail to do so their participation is viewed as problematic and not welcome. Standard practices of parent involvement are those that are valued
within the official discourse on the subject, this discourse is then enacted in what kind of practices are welcome within schools. When minority parents engage in non-standard practices their participation is not viewed as a valuable contribution to their children’s educational experience. Yet, repeatedly scholars in the field have noted that ethnic minority and working class parents are less likely to engage in these sorts of normalized practices (Chavkin & Williams 1993, Souto-Manning and Swick 2006, Moles 2003). The official discourse then excludes these types of practices which may serve the interests of minority students and in the end the students lose.

8.19 Connecting Meaningfully

The final concept of parent involvement and practices related to it that emerged from the participant data focused on the meaningful connections between actors involved in children’s education. Parents in the study signaled the importance of connecting with actors within the school and external to it including other parents and school official for the purpose of information seeking and sharing. This understanding of parent involvement is notable because of the way in which it opens up avenues for parents to participate in their children’s education but also because of the way it directly supports other practices of parent involvement that parents desire to enact.

8.20 Connecting to the School: Allies

As the participant families went about the process of accessing the schools their children would attend for the first time, they often engaged in this process through the mediation of a key resources person that facilitated this access for them. For each family it was a different individual however, there are some shared characteristics that all of these actors shared. For The Suarez-Madariaga family it was a parent volunteer name Cindy who helped them with the enrollment process and then supported their early settlement into the school. For the Ventura-Cruz family it was the school’s ESL teacher. For the Vasquez-Mejia family it was a friend of the family. All of these mediating individuals had a knowledge of both the home culture as well as the new Canadian culture and school system, they were able to act as translators both linguistically and culturally for the parents and students and their role extended beyond supporting the parents in accessing
the school to facilitating access to other supports for the children and family. For example, Cindy helped the Suarez-Madarriaga family access income supplements and program for low-income families in addition to supporting them through the enrollment process. Ernesto Jr. and Juan’s ESL teacher provided support for the family at the time of enrollment but also continued following up on the children’s progress as well as keeping the parent informed about what was taking place at school. For Brenda, her resource person helped with enrollment into the school but also supported her in navigating other paperwork that she had to do while settling here.

For all of these actors, their role was not limited to simply school based issues or access but rather they became involved in a number of areas in the family’s life, often including social and personal interactions. These key individuals were not only a resource for access to the school in the initial acts of registration but also provided a means of cultural interpretation in the early days of the family’s settlement. This interpretation was made easier for them because they understood both sides of the experiences. The mediators shared their Latin American identity with the families but had also been in Canada long enough or were actors within institutions that could support the families to navigate those systems. This shared identity was something that all the families mentioned as an important characteristic. The spoke about it as factor that helped this individual understand the family and what they were going through while providing support. Barriers of language were also eliminated with these actors as they spoke Spanish and also acted as translators for parents.

Parents also noted that the interactions with these key resource people were often more informal and less structured then with teachers or other school personal. These actors were often referred to as friends and not simply actors within the school site. The proximity that this created in the relationships was something that was noted by parents as being markedly different but also allowing for deeper and more nuanced relationships to develop.

The relationships that families had with these key actors point to few aspects of the home school relationship which needs to be improved. Teachers and other school personnel
need to be informed and educated about the additional needs and concerns of children and their families in their classroom, particularly immigrant families. These families have different experiences and live through different situations in which they may need the support and help of teachers who are aware of the experience but also knowledgeable about the available resources and tools that can help these families. This includes financial knowledge, settlement and employment services, health and wellness, justice and legal assistance just to name a few. Although school agents like settlement workers are useful they are in some ways disconnected from the schools. Parents from other countries where these sorts of agents do not exist may not be comfortable or knowledgeable about how to interact with these actors. Teachers need to be the ones drawing on these resources. This impacts the curriculum that exists within teacher education, as pre-service teachers need to be aware the needs and experiences of immigrant families which will most likely make up a large part of their future student body. Practicing teachers aware of the services, supports and resources that are available to these families and which could greatly improve the quality of life of their students and families. This requires a rethinking of teachers’ role in the lives of their students. It goes beyond viewing themselves as simply involved in the academic development of their students but also contributing to the social and personal development of their students and contributing to the healthy development of their families and communities.

8.21 Extended Family: There and Here

When families spoke about key actors in their children’s education within the context of their country of origin they often mentioned extended family members as key sources of support. As these families immigrated to Canada, they lose their access to these networks of support as family members are no longer close by. However, even when these family members are present parents tend to not utilize them as resources for various reasons.

This is a significant shift in family functioning as a result of immigration. As a result of longer establishment of some nationalities of Latin Americans in Canada, family chain migration is becoming a common pattern of arrival and settlement. This kind of migration has implications on family life as it is often after a period of separation that families are reunited and the dynamics have to be sorted out again. This chain migration pattern is
often accompanied by one member or group of family members dependent on another more settled group which can be a space for conflict and difficulties in family relationships. This is especially challenging for those families who while having had close inter-familial relationships were equal in social and class positions in their home nation and arrive in Canada having moved down the social ladder in contrast to their other family members. As these patterns of Latin American migration to Canada are changing its influence on the lives of individuals and families within a number of social spheres (education, economy, health, etc) must be considered.

While all 3 families received support in the education of their children while in their home country, it is interesting to note that despite having family members living in their new home city, they were accessed as support for education. In their country of origin extended family members played a key role in the education of their children. In the case of Fernando Suarez-Madarriaga it was his grandmother that accompanied him on the first day of school. Estela spoke about her mother being a key actor in her son’s education not only as a caregiver but also as an interested party who monitored his progress. For Ernesto having family close by that you could draw on for childcare and support was a distinct factor in his experience in Ecuador. Brenda’s in-laws provided childcare and support to her as a single parent which supported Victor’s educational experience.

In all 3 families, however, we see that as crisis arose in their children’s education where they needed outside support they did not turn to their families but instead to the key school actors who had assisted them before or they attempted to resolve the issue themselves. Brenda and Elena speak about their extended family as not being able to provide support because of their lack of knowledge about the system and its nuances given these family members limited experience. Even in regards to childcare support none of the families saw their extended family as a resource to them in balancing their other commitments and the before or after school care of their children. Children were often caring for themselves before or after school as in the case of Victor or older
children cared for younger siblings as with Ernesto Jr. and Juan and in the case of the Suarez-Madarriaga family one of the parents remained at home as the main caregiver.

There can be a number of reasons for this shift in dynamics with the extended family. Often the extended family is also in the process of migration though perhaps at different stages which means their time resources and cultural knowledge may be too limited to support their family members. In all the families we also observe some tension or conflict that occurs as a result of the migration process and often a conflict of values which parents want to promote among their children and which are not supported by other family members.

8.22 Connecting with Other Parents: Friends and Strangers

Since parents find themselves more disconnected from what served as important social and support networks for their children’s education in their home countries it would appear that this is a necessary tool to be use within the Canadian context. However, parents face challenges in connecting with other parents within the school system and as such these networks of parents and other key actors do no exist or are not strengthened in the experience of these parents. The parents in this study in speaking about their pre-migration experiences spoke about opportunities to connect with other parents within their children’s schools in their country of origin. Interestingly, these connections often served to support other more traditional forms of parent involvement.

For example, Estela spoke about her relationship with parent of her son’s friend. These 2 mothers communicated on a regular basis regarding their sons’ experiences at school and relied on each other to fill in the gaps in information that might not have been relayed through their children. For Estela her role as a concerned mother who monitored her son’s homework was advanced through a connection with another parent in the same class on whom she could rely on to share information. While the act of monitoring her son’s responsibilities at home related to school is a school centric form of parent involvement, Elena in the context of her home country used a parental network to extend and enrich this school centric form of parent involvement.
Similarly, Brenda recounts parent sessions that the school held on a regular basis which were aimed at educating parents and building awareness of certain pertinent issues and topics in their children’s education. Brenda enjoyed these educational sessions for their content which allowed her to reflect on her parenting practices but also because it allowed her to connect with other parents. In these sessions parents supported each other to provide a good home learning environment for their children academically, emotionally and socially. They could learn from each other and have time to reflect on their own practices within the home-school continuum. This was a meaningful way of connecting parents.

Ernesto spoke about his connection with other parents who were in his son’s class as relationships of friendship. There was less of an emphasis on the sharing resources or information with other parents. Yet, it is notable that he felt a closeness and familiarity with the parents of other children at his son’s school.

Two ways of creating meaningful connections with other parents emerge from these experiences. In the case of Brenda, it is the school that brings parents together for the purpose of creating awareness and building capacity among the parent group. This is very distinct from the approach of bringing parents together for the purpose of governance. If anything, it mirrors more closely the experiences of the parents in COPLA in Delagado-Gaitan’s (1994) work with a parent groups that supported each other in their children’s education.

The other way that parents connect is on a personal level with individual whom they would classify as friends. Within their own cultural context it is natural that they would be able to create social networks of support among their peers. In Canada, however this is not the case. In speaking about his experience connecting with parent within a Canadian context, Ernesto feels that this is a significant challenge. He mentions that there are a few parents within his children’s circle of friends whom he knows and has chatted with. However, the reciprocity and familiarity of friendship is certainly absent from these relationships. Furthermore, he feels completely alienated from other parents.
outside this small circle and cites the cultural differences as a barrier to meaningfully connecting with other parents.

His wife, Elena, shares an experience about how connecting with another parent of her same cultural group and who was knowledgeable about the school system supported her in helping her son achieve his aspirations. Through her community involvement in her own ethnic group she connected with a parent who provided her with ideas about how to navigate the school system in the benefit of her son and his future. She took his advice and applied it promptly to her son’s experience and in the end achieved the desired results. This relationship served to support her in creating learning conditions for her son that would allow him to achieve the high expectations set for him. However, this experience in connecting with another parent is a unique one. Brenda and Estela spoke about the challenges in connecting with other parents within the school system in Canada.

Brenda spoke about her feelings of isolation from other parents within her son’s school. She found it difficult to connect with them because of the language and cultural differences. This caused her to choose to stay on the periphery and not seek out other parents for support in her son’s education.

Estela and Fernando also identified cultural differences as barriers to connecting with other parents meaningfully. They were able to connect with other Latin American parents, however, given the diversity among this group they often found more differences than similarities in terms of shared values regarding child rearing and education. As such, these relationships were not presented by them as helpful resources for their children education.

What is notable here as well is that the school does not act in anyway to create opportunities for parents to connect with one another. This is due to the fact that parents connecting for the purposes of information seeking and sharing does not fall within the traditional conceptions of parents involvement. The official discourse leaves room for parents to come together and connect meaningfully only within the context of school councils involved in governance. However, this study shows that the reasons underrepresented parents, and in particular, Spanish-speaking parents, are not involved in
school must be understood in the context of the activities and avenues of redress provided to them by the school and those they themselves can create, given the opportunity. School activities, which have been institutionalized to involve parents, have usually ignored the needs of underrepresented groups who are unfamiliar with the school's expectations. Schools must examine the non-conventional activities in which underrepresented parents do participate in order to learn the needs of the Spanish-speaking families. In this study, the non-conventional activities, such as information sharing and seeking with parents of a shared cultural group, were ones that made parent feel a part of and be active in their children's schooling, thus becoming empowered. However, as noted this was only one experience for one of the parents which clearly demonstrates a need for more to be done to encourage this kind of meaningful connections.
Chapter 9
Conclusion

In this final chapter I will review and summarize the key findings of this study and its contribution to the advancement of knowledge in this area. Finally, I will discuss potential directions for future research that other scholars might pursue.

9.1 Summary of Findings

This work explored questions of conceptions of parent involvement among Latin American parents with students in Toronto schools. Through employing a life history approach family members produced personal and collective recounts focused on education in collaboration with the principal investigator. These life histories revealed the practices and conceptions around parent involvement in education of these parents and students. These practices and conceptions existed and were enacted both within the context of their country of origin and as they arrived and settled in Canada. The practices and conceptions that were identified while shared across all the participant families were also uniquely developed depending on their particular experience. That is to say each family enacted similar conceptions of parent involvement in unique ways that fit their reality. The parents in this study conceptualize themselves as actors within their children’s education developing certain roles. Ideas about education and practices related to it are connected to these roles and enacted by them and their children.

Parent participants in this study conceived of themselves as protagonists in their children’s education charged with the task of defining the educational experience for their children in its objective, content and process. Their definitions of education for their children in their new home consisted of much more than academic learning and encompassed moral, cultural, social and professional development as well. Parents also conceived of themselves as advocates for their children and their education. They found themselves often at odds with the values of the school system and used whatever means they had access to challenge decisions they did not support and ensure their children’s survival and thriving in the school system. To achieve these conceptions parents also
engaged in the key practice of seeking and connecting with allies. These allies acted as gatekeepers which allowed them access to the school and its system. They also provided practical support for parents as they navigated through a new system. These allies were not always readily available though they were highly critical to the experience of the families in this project.

In all of these areas participants in this study affirmed that their conceptions of parent involvement in education diverged from the official discourse of parent involvement in Ontario education in a number of ways. Their conceptions and practices expanded the normative notions of parent involvement and beyond that were often at odds with what schools and their governing bodies understood as parent involvement in education. The parent participants in this project signaled the divergent and even conflicting perspectives that they held in regards to their children’s education and called for a conception of parent involvement that would open up a more equitable dialogical space for schools and families. The policy as it exists now and the practices as reflected in the experience of the families in this study begin from the premise of schools as “first among equals” which Cutler (2002, p.202) uses to describe the other part of the official discourse that exists within the academic literature on parent involvement. This signals that within the existing official discourse the certain expressions of parent involvement find legitimacy through their mention within documents that further this discourse while the practices of parents living in the margins continue to exist within the margins. For parent participants in this study, even when they engaged in some of the practices detailed in the policy that find legitimacy within the official discourse they often did so in a way that was non-traditional. On the surface this participation would appear to align with the official discourse on parent involvement. However, as the narratives of the participants demonstrate these practices are enacted in unique ways which challenge views of minority families and their relationships with schools. They disrupt the often taken for granted assumptions that working class families or families of color or immigrant families cannot, will not or do not participate actively in the educational lives of their children in a way that is valuable to schools. The way in which these practices are deployed and the actors’ conceptions of the purpose and functions of these practices are what sets them apart. These activities are not taken for granted and rather infused with
meaning drawn from the research context, the actor’s understanding and position within this contexts and the individual and collective experiences of education in their country of original and as immigrants. Issues of power are brought to bear on the relationship between parents and schools as parents see themselves as advocates defending the educational experience of their children. Tensions and discrepancies about what education is and who gets to define are brought to the forefront by all of these families. Similarly they are interested in connecting with other actors within the school for practical reasons but also to ensure that their children accomplish the goals they have established for them. Although parents councils are a venue within which this connecting could occur and perhaps even advocacy work that is more collective in nature it doesn’t appear that parent councils are being deployed in that way and much less understood by parents as sites of innovation parent involvement practices. What this signals is that a blanket approach of simply changing the practices that receive legitimacy within the official discourse on parent involvement is not the approach that is needed to include minority parents and secure the success of students of working class or minority families. For example, policy initiatives like the Parent’s Reaching Out Grants could be a very successful tool in engaging with parents who find themselves at a distance from the school. However, these have to be deployed in such a way that the actors from within the school are those with whom parents on the outside will connect meaningfully. The process of engaging parents who are seen as being peripheral to already existing home-school relationships needs to begin at the examination of why these parents and their practices are viewed as peripheral and what their conceptions and practices might actually add to the policy and practice of parent involvement as it is currently enacted.

9.2 Contributions to Advancement of Knowledge

Recognizing that the research knowledge on the Latin American community in Canada is in the early stages of development this work provides an initial foundation on which to continue developing knowledge on the experiences of this community particularly in the area of education. A key contribution of this work to the advancement of knowledge in this area can be found in the methodological and conceptual foundations of the work. The use of life history in this work is of particular value to this endeavor of expanding the
knowledge of the group since it allows for the inclusion of context and nuance within the experiences of the participants. It should be noted however, the caution that scholars who employ this work present and which I echo: One life history does not speak to the whole experience of any group, but rather contributes to the deepening of knowledge of one aspect of their experience. This is certainly the case for this project. While each of the families had the opportunity to engage in deep meaning making about their conceptions and practices of parent involvement, the findings presented here are not exhaustive nor should they be generalized across all Latin American parents. Instead what should be noted is the nuanced ways in which each of the families enact their roles within their children’s education throughout the process of their migration and even prior to this life changing experience in their home country.

The use of life history in this project allowed for the experiences of the participants to be heard and understood not only in the context of their home country but also within a time continuum which connected their previous experiences in education to their current practices and conceptions. This is a valuable aspect as the participants demonstrated that many of their conceptions and practices were rooted in their previous experiences both in their home country and throughout the migration process to Canada. As previously mentioned a fundamental aspect of life history is the intersection between “human experience and social context” (Cole & Knowles, p. 9) and historical processes (Candida Smith 2003) to create the possibility of understanding. The use of this methodology for this work allowed for the inclusion of context and historical processes to come of the forefront as meaning making occurred between the research participants and the principal investigator. It also created a space within which the emotional, social and psychological aspects of the experiences of the participants could be included and brought to the forefront. This extends the analysis of this project beyond simply the reporting of experiences by participants and instead creates a richer and more nuanced portrait of their experience as actors within the school system. This approach to the study of education certainly adds a most important element in humanizing the experiences of families who are often viewed through the lens of deficiency. By hearing the stories of each of these families in context the external processes which mitigate their actions and their own struggles and triumphs in negotiating and challenging those forces are brought to light.
Connected to the employment of a life history approach in this study is also the conceptual foundation of Critical Race Theory. This theoretical approach, which guided the development and implementation of this work, contributed to its unique development. The use of stories, which appear especially in the portraits of each family that participated, is a key element of CRT research. For CRT scholars the importance of foregrounding the stories of people of color is essential to illuminating the experiences of those individual and groups that are often relegated to the margins. Beyond simply interviewing these participants however, the use of story allows for the construction of a complex and whole world around the participants which provides a deeper and more insightful view of the experiences of the actors. At the same time, the context and time continuum that the work provides when guided by the principles of CRT challenges the taken-for-granted notions and barriers that exist and continue to reproduce in equality. This is achieved through the telling and hearing of new stories which challenge those previously assumed constructs. CRTs commitment to meaningful social change is accomplished by bringing these stories which are often silenced to life as has been done in this work.

9.3 Future Research Directions

The questions posed at the beginning of this document regarding the existence of potentially transformative conceptions and practices of parent involvement for among Latino families and for Latina/o students are answered through the conceptions of parent involvement that the participants shared. The more expansive notions of parents as protagonists, advocates and key conduits emphasize the practices that would contribute significantly to positive schooling experiences for Latina/o students particularly by promoting high expectations for achievement, strengthening their bicultural identity through supporting familial bonds between the generations.

The unique conceptions of parent involvement that the parent participants in this study put forth demands that practices and policies around parent involvement in schools shift in a direction to allow these conceptions to be enacted more easily and effectively. If parents are to be protagonists, advocates and conduits in their children’s education then curriculum must create room for parents to define their children’s education and how this
definition will impact their experience of schools. This moves beyond simply calling together parents at the provincial level to provide input on parent involvement, it means meaningful engagement of parents in the development of curriculum at the local level of the school and classroom. This will require creative and challenging ideas of how to include parents in a process that has been off-limits. For Latin American parents such as those represented in this study this process would support the transference of a more complex definition of education that includes both academic and social, cultural, moral training to the 2nd generation. Rather than the sense of the school working in conflict with the goals of the parents, there would be a sense of collaboration and shared purpose. In order for this to happen, educators need to be made aware of the unique needs of minority students and working class students within an anti-racist framework from early in their careers so that they can build a strong foundation of inclusive collaboration with parents of all walks of life. The areas of curriculum and policy must adjust to include parents’ definitions and conceptions of education and thus in the process include parents. Curriculum must create room for parents to define and contribute to the definitions of education and the kinds of education that exists for their children. Policy must allow clear channels for parents to bring relevant questions and challenges about their children’s experience in publicly funded schools to the forefronts perhaps in the style of an ombudsperson who acts as an impartial 3rd party mediator. These actions are just the beginning of a potentially transformative shift in the way parent involvement in education looks in this province. One this is for certain there is much work to be done.

Home-School relationships are central elements of students’ experiences that are negotiated daily among parents, teachers and other school officials. These negotiations are based on each party’s conception of the relationships and their role within it. The findings of this study demonstrate that the parent participants posses unique conceptions of their role within the home-school relationships which is based on their experiences of education in their country of origin and their experience as immigrants in North America. Future research and practice should attempt to explore how these varied experiences can be reconciled once immigrants settle into their new schooling context and how teachers can be made more aware and prepared to act on these valuable conceptions that minority families bring to the schooling process.
The interactions between school actors and parents are modeled after the relations of the larger groups that they represent. Empowerment or disempowerment occurs at the point wherein larger group relations of power inequity are mirrored at the micro level of individual interactions. If we are really to move towards a new conception of parent involvement that is inclusive of minority parents we must begin from the point of recognizing parents of color and working class parents as valuable to the project of schooling in the ways in which they support the education of their children. Only by dismantling the deficient notions of parents of color and working class parents can new forms of parent involvement be imagined and then enacted in the best interest of students and in the hopes of creating a more equal and just society.
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