The Value of Hard Work: Lessons on Parent Involvement from an (Im)migrant Household

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In this article, Gerardo López expands the concept of "parent involvement" by illustrating ways that parents are involved in their children's educational development that lie outside of traditional school-related models. Rather than viewing involvement as the enactment of specific scripted school activities, López describes how the Padillas, an (im)migrant family, understood involvement as a means of instilling in their children the value of education through the medium of hard work, and viewed taking their children to work as a form of involvement. López argues that, while exposing their children to their hard work in the fields, the Padilla parents were simultaneously teaching them three important, "real-life" lessons: 1) to become acquainted with the type of work they do; 2) to recognize that this work is difficult, strenuous, and without adequate compensation; and 3) to realize that without an education they may end up working in a similar type of job. These findings not only challenge discursive/hegemonic understandings of parent involvement, but also open up new avenues for research and practice.

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Within educational discourse, parent involvement is generally understood in terms of specific practices such as bake sales, fundraisers, PTA/PTO, and "back-to-school" nights. It connotes volunteering in schools, attending school activities, as well as participating on parent advisory councils and/or school governance boards. Parent involvement also refers to activities performed in the home to supplement classroom instruction, such as reviewing student homework. Even the term parent involvement delimits who the primary players are — or ought to be — when it comes to being involved in children's education (Hidalgo, 1998).

The definition of parent involvement has historically been quite transparent, relegating it to a scripted role to be "performed," rather than to unhearsaed activities that parents and other family members routinely practice. In other words, the sphere of parent involvement has become a privileged domain signified by certain legitimate acts. Thus, to be involved is to be subjected to these "social regularities" (Foucault, 1972) that engender the rules and roles of involvement behavior.

However, in order to be involved in these socially sanctioned ways, parents and other family members must have prior knowledge of these particular involvement "scripts." Moreover, such familiarity must be coupled with a willingness to perform these functions, as well as the opportunity to be involved in these specific ways (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Some scholars (Auerbach, 1989; Delgado-Gaitán, 1990; Valdés, 1996) suggest that traditional involvement roles may be outside the cultural repertoire of some parents — especially marginalized parents who may have limited exposure to schools, lack of socioeconomic resources, and/or prior negative experiences with school organizations. Other scholars (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1998) suggest that parents' construction of their own roles may render certain activities unacceptable, especially if the parents do not perceive traditional involvement roles as suitable options. In either case, parents and caretakers who are not involved in the usual ways may not be perceived as being involved in the educational lives of their children.

Unfortunately, research overwhelmingly suggests that the vast majority of marginalized families fall in the "uninvolved" category (Chavkin, 1993; Moles, 1993). As a result, many have been judged to be unconcerned and perhaps uncaring, when in fact all that these parents have "failed" to do was to become involved in normative ways (Clark, 1983; Lightfoot, 1978). Certainly, marginalized parents and family members are involved to a significant
extent in the lives of their children, yet many of their activities are outside conventional understandings of involvement. In other words, involvement can consist of a number of different activities, but only a few of these activities are acknowledged in the educational arena.

These marginalized forms of parent involvement not only challenge the rigidity of traditional involvement, but also reveal a counter-story of involvement, a story that has been suppressed by and excluded from the academic literature. These subjugated narratives are the stories that are not circulated — stories that do not conform to or do not fit traditionalist interpretations of involvement. By highlighting these subjugated accounts, this study offers a significant contribution to our theoretical understanding of parent involvement, while offering the academic community a broadened space for research and practice.

The “Transparency” of Parent Involvement

In recent years, there has been much academic press surrounding the benefits of parent involvement in children’s education (Cassanova, 1996; Chavkin, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Henry, 1996). Educators, practitioners, policymakers, and community and grassroots organizations alike have joined the growing movement to “democratize” educational settings by calling for the increased voice and/or visibility of those individuals historically marginalized in educational decisionmaking processes, pedagogical practices, and leadership positions. In fact, the literature is rife with discussions of participatory governance that call for increased numbers of parent/teacher associations, site-based decisionmaking councils, parent advisory councils, and a host of other governing and advisory bodies as mechanisms for increased collaboration among parents, schools, and communities (Epstein, 1995; Henderson, 1987; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986; Henry, 1996).

The visibility of parents in schools is growing as schools struggle to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, while at the same time being held to tougher accountability criteria. In fact, research finds that parents from many different cultures demonstrate a deep interest in being involved in their children’s education, which puts great demands on schools to meet the complex needs of diverse families (Chavkin, 1993; Chavkin & Williams, 1989a, 1989b; Delgado-Gaitán, 1990). As the larger social and economic context adjusts to this pluralistic reality, schools and families are adjusting their priorities to the terrain of these demands.

Many parents, for example, have called for increased opportunity to participate in the educational lives of their children. These pleas do not emerge solely from majority populations, but also from marginalized groups that have increasingly organized to push for parent voice and participation in schools (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990; Hatch, 1998). In recent years, parents and community groups have begun to question their traditional roles as “passive” players in the educational realm, and have demanded broader opportunities for involvement by making schools more accessible and accountable to them.

Parents and other community members have mobilized politically, making valiant efforts to connect the community, home, and school. For example, they have demanded school meetings in local community centers and made recommendations on how to improve relations with school organizations (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990). Other parent and community advocates have collectively argued that parents, not educative agencies, know what is best for children. Many have embraced the logic of homeschooling and school choice as possible outlets for direct parent control over their children’s education.

In response, schools have increasingly attempted to move away from the “scientific management” logic of Frederick Taylor (1912) and Max Weber (1947) — adopting instead organizational and leadership styles that are less hierarchical, less bureaucratic, and less authoritarian. In fact, much of the “successful schools” research suggests that effective schools foster and encourage a climate of caring, respect, egalitarianism, collaboration, and a steadfast belief that all children can succeed (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Henry, 1996; Noddings, 1984; Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994). Furthermore, these schools have adopted an organizational culture that calls for increased collaboration between the home and the school while adopting new conceptualizations and understandings of administrative and organizational power (Capper, 1993; Meier, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1987). Research suggests that power is not only shared in these successful school contexts, but is effectively utilized to transform educational organizations within a community of learners (see also Comer, 1996; Scheurich, 1998; Slavin, 1996).

In short, educators and policymakers are becoming aware that schools do not exist in isolation and they are increasing efforts to incorporate the voices of parents in traditional educational practices. Backed by research findings suggesting that parent involvement is related to increased student productivity (Becher, 1986; Coleman, 1991; Comer, 1986; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1986, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1995; Henderson, 1987; Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986; Weisz, 1990), schools have also taken aggressive steps to dismantle the multiple barriers that inhibit full collaboration between the home and the school.

As a whole, the research on parent involvement is seemingly definitive: its benefits are widely praised and its practice is rapidly becoming the “vanguard of educational reform” (Fine, 1993, p. 682). In fact, certain targeted federal programs have now legislated parent involvement as a requisite for funding. Its widespread acceptance is applauded by individuals, conservative and pro-
gressive alike, in all areas of education and policymaking — individuals who "are appropriately distressed by a failing public sector, by broken promises of 'professionalism,' and by empty dreams of reform" (p. 682). Although some research suggests that the link between parent involvement and student educational outcomes is not straightforward (White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992), most individuals still embrace it as a tool for educational intervention, political representation, and school transformation. In this sense, parent involvement is rapidly becoming a "normalized" practice in education.

Nevertheless, research consistently suggests that marginalized parents are not "involved" at the same rate as many White, middle-class parents (Chavkin, 1993; Meles, 1993, Comer, 1986). This problem needs attention, due to the rapid demographic and economic shift we are currently experiencing on a national scale; research-based projections indicate that children of color — especially children from immigrant backgrounds — will be the largest population of enrolled students in the near future (Orfield, 1988; Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988). With a sense of urgency inspired by such predictions, researchers and policymakers agree that schools must increase efforts to involve marginalized parents in greater numbers.

The purpose of this discussion, however, is not to identify parent involvement practices that "work" for marginalized groups. Such a move would only reify the normality of involvement, while perpetuating the belief that these parents are not involved in the educational lives of their children. Rather, this discussion aims to highlight how marginalized groups from immigrant backgrounds are already involved in the lives of their children, though they may not be "involved" in traditionally sanctioned ways. In this regard, this discussion aims to explore alternate conceptualizations of involvement activity and to investigate how the concept of involvement, as it is traditionally defined, limits the recognition of these subaltern forms of involvement.

Method

For this study I chose a qualitative research methodology. I chose this method primarily because the nature of the research necessitated depth and detail in order to obtain a more holistic perspective of how families negotiated the concept of involvement for themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). For the study, I selected a purposeful sample of five immigrant/migrant families residing in the Texas Rio Grande Valley on the basis of recommendations of personnel in four school districts. For the purpose of this discussion, however, I will elaborate on the involvement practices in one particular household.

School personnel identified the Padilla family as a migrant family whose children were highly successful in school, as defined by academic and non-academic accomplishments, achievements, and successes. Moreover, this family clearly demonstrated a history of academic success: all the children in the family graduated from high school in the top 10 percent of their class and performed exceptionally well in their coursework, as indicated by consistent placement on the school's honor roll.

In order to obtain a more complete impression of the involvement beliefs in this particular household, I conducted a series of observations and in-depth interviews with both immediate and extended family members. A total of sixteen unstructured observations and twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted during a six-month period. The interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes; the longest interview lasted approximately 115 minutes. Individual interviews were supplemented with two "family interviews," where all members of the immediate and extended Padilla family were present. Family interviews were approximately one hour long, and were held at dates and times that maximized participation of all family members. Ten of the individual interviews and both family interviews were conducted in Spanish and were later translated into English by the author. All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed with the consent of the family.

In this discussion, the term immigrant is used to refer to individuals who were born outside of the United States, irrespective of their legal and/or citizenship status. The term migrant, however, refers to the federal definition as defined in the eligibility criteria of Title I Part C, Public Law 103-381. Under this definition, a student whose parent, spouse, or guardian performs "qualifying [seasonal] agricultural or fishing employment as a principal means of livelihood . . . has moved . . . to obtain temporary or seasonal employment" (Preliminary Guidance, 1994) is identified as a migrant student. In this discussion, Mr. and Mrs. Padilla were immigrants, whose principal means of employment was migratory labor. Thus, their children qualified for migrant funding under Title I, Part C.

All five families were identified by personal and professional contacts (i.e., parent involvement coordinators, migrant program coordinators, area superintendents) as having children who were highly successful in school. These children were perceived by these individuals as being the "most educationally ambitious of their peers" (Gándara, 1995, p. 17) — students who demonstrated a history of success in both academic and non-academic pursuits. The family described herein was purposefully selected because interviews with the parents and other family members yielded rich detail in order to obtain a more holistic perspective of how the concept of parent involvement was manifested and understood in this household. Although an analysis of the data suggests that all five families had a similar understanding of involvement, the data gathered in this particular household was the most representative of this nontraditional understanding of involvement.

The terms unstructured and semi-structured describe the nature of the data collection design (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These terms identify the extent to which questions, concepts, and issues are determined prior to the interview and/or observation (Patton, 1990). Unstructured methods do not have a predetermined focus — they aim to gather data that are more open-ended and free-flowing. Semi-structured methods, on the other hand, delimit topics and issues in advance — usually represented as an interview and/or observation guide (Patton, 1990) — reaching in an approach that is more systematic, though not entirely standardized.
Results

Seen through a traditional academic lens, the Padillas appeared to be largely “uninvolved” in their children’s education. Perhaps this is because the Padillas understood involvement as something much broader than traditional academic interpretations. For the Padillas, involvement was seen as teaching their children to appreciate the value of their education through the medium of hard work.

All five Padilla children experienced the hardships of working firsthand at an early age, and they were constantly advised by family members about the limited opportunities available should they choose to forego their education. The Padillas were quite strategic in exposing their children to the world of work, and constantly gave them consejos (advice) about the importance of working hard. By giving their children a “choice” to either work hard at school or work hard in the fields, the Padillas recognized that hard work was the foundation of success in any context, as the following quote from Mr. Padilla reveals:

Well, for me, the easy life doesn’t count. If there’s not a little bit of work, it’s not worth much. For example, all my kids know [how to work] the hoe, they know how to pick grapes — various jobs. So they see that the door is open for them to do more than those types of work. They always told me they were going to stay in school. And it made me happy to hear that, because I taught them how hard it was to work in the fields.

This cogently summarizes the knowledge and beliefs that are valued and encouraged in the Padilla household. This knowledge indicates a strong work ethic, where work is not only a significant factor in the family’s daily life, but is also seen as a motivational tool to encourage children to break out of the cycle of poverty by continuing their education.

Simply put, the Padilla’s story is defined by hard work and persistence. It is a story of immigrant parents who bypassed an education to work at an early age. It is a story of parents who were strategic in their efforts to teach their children to work as hard as they did, but always encouraged their children to stay in school. It is a story of a family for whom the hardships of working in migrant labor did not foster an overbearing sense of defeat or failure, but rather a sense of resilience and perseverance. Above all, it is a story of a family who translated the lessons of working hard in the field into lessons for working hard in school, with the hope that their children would seek options outside of migratory labor. In this discussion, I will try to capture the history of the Padilla family and the collective spirit of work that Mr. and Mrs. Padilla have attempted to inculcate in their children. In this regard, it is a story of values — the value of working hard at a task, regardless of whether that task is in the field or in the classroom.

The Padilla Family History and the Transmission of a Work Ethic

Camilo Padilla, the father of the Padilla household, was born in Buena Vista, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, a small pueblo (rural town) located approximately seventy miles south of the U.S.-Mexico border. At the age of four, Camilo’s father walked out on his family in search of a “better life” in the United States. Left on her own, Camilo’s mother raised her children as best she could, pulling her four children out of school at an early age to help support the family. Although Camilo’s painful memories of growing up in Mexico often escape him, he vividly remembers growing up in abject poverty — “Me crié pobre, muy pobre” (“I grew up poor, very poor”) — having to tend other people’s goats and cows in order to make enough money to eat.

In 1968, when Camilo turned fourteen, his mother moved the family to California, where she reunited with her estranged husband who was working at a large fruit-packing plant in Bakersfield. The family lived and worked together for two years at the packing plant and enrolled Camilo and a younger sister at a local junior high school. As he recalls:

Well, for me, the easy life doesn’t count. If there’s not a little bit of work, it’s not worth much. For example, all my kids know [how to work] the hoe, they know how to pick grapes — various jobs. So they see that the door is open for them to do more than those types of work. They always told me they were going to stay in school. And it made me happy to hear that, because I taught them how hard it was to work in the fields.

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right decision to move away. "Nunca me quejé" ("I never complained"), she once declared during an interview, as though the act of complaining was far worse than the living and working conditions she faced in Fresno. To complain was to publicly admit her incapacity to handle the hardships of migratory work.

Later that year, Margarita was introduced to Camilo by a mutual friend and they started dating soon thereafter. They both worked in the fields, always setting aside small amounts of money in the hope of one day getting married. When they eventually earned enough money for a ceremony, they both returned to Nuevo Leon to exchange vows.

After marriage, they migrated seasonally from Nuevo Leon to California each year, slowly managing to build a home in Mexico with the extra money they had saved. As Mr. Padilla recalls, "Si nos sobraba un peso, comprábamos un ladrillo y se lo poníamos allí" ("If we had an extra dollar, we’d buy a brick and put it there"). This notion of building their own home was a theme that was reiterated by Mr. and Mrs. Padilla during subsequent interviews. It was a manifestation, a symbol, of their hard work, collective effort, and persistence.

They took pride in having built their own home without needing a loan or financial assistance from relatives. As Mr. Padilla once stated, "Nunca les pedí dinero al banco ni a nadie para hacer esa casa. Nunca. La hicimos poco a poco, pero la hicimos" ("We never asked for money from the bank or anyone to build the home. Never. We built it little by little, but we built it"). In other words, they felt a certain degree of satisfaction in working hard and not having to rely on anyone to assist them in the process.

Work was such a pervasive and integral part of their lives that they continued to migrate throughout Mrs. Padilla’s five pregnancies:

Nunca quisiste faltar al trabajo por tener una criatura. ¿No, ni lo mende Dios? Nos tienes de aquí y allá, me tocaba a dar la luz. Descansaba unas semanas y a regresar a la labor. Pues no hay más que el trabajo. Yo nomás le pido a Dios que no falte trabajo y que haya suficiente para todos. Es todo. Yo no le pido a Dios dinero ni riquezas ni nada. . . . Pues eso es lo único que le pido a Dios: no enfermarnos y seguir adelante. Trabajar, que nos de fuerzas para trabajar. Es todo.

I never wanted to miss work to have a child. No, God forbid. We would leave from here, and over there I would give birth. I would rest for some weeks and then go back to work. Well, there is nothing greater than work. I only ask God that we have a job and that there is enough [work] for everyone. That’s all. I don’t ask God for money or riches or anything. . . . That’s all I ask of God: that we don’t get sick and that we go on. To work. That He gives us strength to work. That’s all.

This work ethic was constantly communicated to the Padilla children while growing up. This communication — informed by social, cultural, and economic conditions — was the Padilla’s way of teaching their children what they felt was important to learn in life. The parents believed that if their children learned to work hard, they would be equipped with the necessary skills...
to be successful in both the academic world and the world of work. As one of the children explained, Mr. and Mrs. Padilla expected all of their five children to heed their advice, work hard, and be successful in school:

Interviewer: What was it like growing up in this household?
Daughter: Kind of challenging, 'cause everybody’s real smart and they kind of expect me [to be] too.
Interviewer: How was that?
Daughter: Hard, because the expectations are way up there
Interviewer: What do you mean by that?
Daughter: Well, I’m just expected to, you know, to work hard and stuff.
Interviewer: Who expects you to work hard?
Daughter: Everyone — especially my mom and dad. They always told us to work as hard as we could.
Interviewer: How do you feel about that? About working hard?
Daughter: Well, it’s good I guess.
Interviewer: Why do you think it’s good?
Daughter: I don’t know. I guess it’s — well, I don’t know how to explain it. I guess if I work hard in school and stuff, I won’t have to work as hard as my mom and dad.
Interviewer: Why do you believe that?
Daughter: I don’t know. We were always told that, I guess, to work hard. And they took us with them [to work] to show us what it was like to work. And, well, they always told us, “You have a choice: you could either work hard in school or you could work hard in the fields.”
Interviewer: And so you decided to do what?
Daughter: To work hard in school, of course. I mean, I already know what it’s like to work out there [in the fields]...

As the above conversation suggests, working hard was central to the Padillas. The only choice available to the children was where they would put their efforts and energies. Not surprisingly, all of the Padilla children chose to work hard in school.

Despite their parents’ lack of “formal” involvement in their schooling, all five of the Padilla children have had great success in school. With the exception of the youngest child, who was still enrolled in high school at the time of the interviews, all the Padilla children have been among the top graduates of their high school classes: José Alfonso, the oldest child, graduated second in his class and went on to the U.S. Naval Academy, where he is majoring in biology and pre-medicine; Kathy, the second oldest, was ranked ninth in her class and is now enrolled in the nursing school at the University of Texas–Pan American; Aimee, the middle child, graduated sixth in her class and is a biology major at the University of Texas at Austin; and Yesenia, the second youngest, also graduated sixth in her class and is a business major at the local community college. Clearly, these children have been successful in school and are doing exceptionally well in their postsecondary careers — despite the fact that their education was repeatedly interrupted by constant migration and that their parents were not involved in traditionally sanctioned ways.

The Value of Hard Work
As the data suggest, hard work was strongly valued in the Padilla household. It is a value that has been cited by others as characteristic of migrant populations (Chavkin, 1991; Prewitt-Díaz & Trotter, 1990). However, what makes this finding significant is that the Padillas largely perceived their role as transmitting their work ethic to their children. Mr. Padilla explained that this was their way of being “involved” in their children’s lives:

Interviewer: ¿Ahora quiero saber si usted o su esposa están involucrados en las escuelas de algún modo u otro? Por ejemplo, como voluntarios o en el Comité de Padres.
Mr. Padilla: No señor.
Interviewer: ¿Han ido a las escuelas para agarrar algún tipo de entrenamiento o alguna clase?
Mr. Padilla: No señor.
Interviewer: ¡Hummm. ¿No han ido a alguna reunión o junta de padres o algo así?
Mr. Padilla: No. Realmente no. Es que siempre estamos ocupados con el trabajo. Casí no vamos a la escuela.
Interviewer: ¡Dónde estamos ocupados con los maestros?
Interviewer: ¿Pues cómo está involucrado en la educación de sus hijos?
Mr. Padilla: Fuen yo las he enseñado lo que es el trabajo y lo duro que es. O sea, ellos saben que si no se esfuerzan en los estudios, eso va a ser el trabajo que les va tocar. Yo les he abierto los ojos a esa realidad.
Interviewer: ¿Y porqué es importante eso, el trabajo?
Mr. Padilla: Well, we showed them what work is and how hard it is. So they know that if they don’t focus in their studies, that is the type of work they’ll end up doing. I’ve opened their eyes to that reality.
Mr. Padilla: ¿Pues el trabajo? ¡Es el trabajo! ¡Es el principal!

Interviewer: Sí claro, pero quiero saber, ¿por qué es importante?

Mr. Padilla: Por eso, porque es trabajo. Si no trabajamos, no tenemos. No hay futuro si no hay trabajo. Pues de ahí saca uno para todo. Yo los llevaba a la labor para que ellos vieran lo que es el trabajo. Que supieran como se trabajan y lo duro que es también. Que supieran de donde salía para los gastos. Que supieran — o que se dieran cuenta — que el dinero no se agarraba nonds así. Que era duro. Entonces digo yo: The first thing is to work. A enseñarlos a los hijos el trabajo y como usar sus manos para trabajar.

Mr. Padilla: Because it's work! It's the main thing, it's the principal [thing]!

Interviewer: Yes, clearly, but I want to know, why is it important?

Mr. Padilla: For that reason, because it's work. If we don't work, we don't eat. There is no future if there's no work. From there, you obtain everything. I would take them into the fields so that they would know what work was all about. So that they would know how to work and also how hard it was. So that they would know where one gets [money] to pay the bills. So that they would know — or that they would realize — that money did not come from nowhere. That it was difficult [to earn money]. So I say: the first thing is to know how to work. To teach my kids how to work and how to use their hands to work.

The transmission of sociocultural values has rarely been documented in the literature as a type of parent involvement (see Delgado-Gaitán, 1994, for an exception). However, this research suggests that the Padillas transmitted this transmission of values as an important form of involvement that their children needed. The family's sociocultural orientation toward work was so ingrained, so taken-for-granted, that when I asked Mr. Padilla why it was important to teach this concept to his children, his response was simply to restate the obvious — "Because it's work!" In other words, for Mr. Padilla, hard work was such a fundamental fact that it warranted no explanation.

As the above exchange suggests, the Padillas took their children to work to show them how difficult it was, and to make them appreciate the value of money. They felt that working provided a powerful lesson in life by "opening their children's eyes" to a migrant reality that was characterized by poverty, hardships, and constant mobility. The quote also suggests that the Padillas took their children to work to show them the value of an education: to make their children realize that if they did not work hard in their studies, they would end up working hard in the fields for the rest of their lives.

The above exchange suggests that there was also a third reason why the Padillas took their children to work: to teach them "how to use their hands." This suggests that the Padillas felt that their children would always have a set of manual skills to rely on, just in case they needed them in the future. It was their way of ensuring that their children would be prepared for any unanticipated life circumstance. These three beliefs (work as a lesson in life, work to teach children the value of school, and work to learn life skills) will be discussed in more detail.

Work as a Lesson in Life Because the Padillas have experienced the harsh living and working conditions of being both immigrants and migrant laborers in the United States, and because they realize the importance of education as a vehicle for their children to break out of the cycle of poverty, they felt that one of the ways to teach their children was to have them experience these hardships firsthand. As Mr. Padilla suggested in an earlier quote, his way of being involved was to teach his children about work and the hardships of working in the field. Therefore, the act of taking his children to work served an educative purpose, while simultaneously filling an economic need for the Padilla household. However, the Padillas were careful not to blur the distinction between having their children work to teach them a lesson and having them work to assist the family financially. This distinction is particularly important, because the meaning and significance given to the work in both situations is no necessarily the same. In this case, Mr. and Mrs. Padilla appear to have taken their children to work because there was an educational component to the work.

As Mrs. Padilla once stated: "Ellas si nos dieron una aliviación en el trabajo, pero nunca te dabamos mucho trabajo a ellos. Un pedacito nada más para que se vayan ensentiendo poco a poco. [They did give us a hand at work, but we never gave them much work to do. Only a little piece [of land] so that they can learn, little by little.]" Interestingly, Mrs. Padilla used the slang derivative of the term aliviar (to get better, to relieve) to describe how her children's work contributed to the family unit. Although this word has multiple connotations, the usual translation in Spanish is to "give a hand" or to "lighten things up." For example, one can "give a hand" by reducing the total amount of work there is to do, or one can "lighten things up" by increasing the total amount of money brought into the household. Nevertheless, Mrs. Padilla also stated that she would allocate a section of the field for the children "so that they can learn," which suggests that the Padillas took their children to work to teach them a particular lesson surrounding the value and importance of work. This belief is also illuminated in the following account by Mr. Padilla:

Cuando fuimos a North Dakota, yo nunca trabajaba mucho a los muchachos. O sea "ahora nos ganamos cien dólares, vamos a ver si ganamos cien cincuenta mañana." No, Me dieron los otros trabajadores, "vamos a dar otra vuelta, todavía es muy temprano." No, les dije, "yo no traje a mis hijos aquí para matabaros. Los traje a enseñarles." O sea que yo no les lleve para que yo consiguiera dinero a parte que me dieran el dinero

When we went to North Dakota, I never over-worked the kids. In other words, "Today we earned one hundred dollars; let's see if we can earn one hundred fifty tomorrow." No. The other workers would tell me, "Let's go around [the field] once more, it's still early." No, I would tell them, "I didn't bring my children here to kill them. I brought them here to teach them." In other words, I didn't take them so that I could get money or have them give their [earnings] to me. No. Many
Mr. Padilla wanted their children to learn through the experience of work: 1) to become acquainted with the type of work they do; 2) to recognize that this work is difficult, strenuous, and without adequate compensation; and 3) to realize that without an education they may end up working in a similar type of job. Mr. and Mrs. Padilla believed that this type of experiential learning not only opened their children’s eyes to the multiple hardships facing immigrant/migrant populations, but also helped them to develop a consciousness that was geared toward education.

While there is no evidence in this study to support Mr. Padilla’s claim that other migrant parents see their children solely as a source of income, he did, nevertheless, perceive himself as having a uniquely different orientation toward work than other parents, an orientation that viewed work as a type of lesson:

Mr. Padilla: Ellos saben exactamente que no es fácil el trabajo. Y saben que el trabajo en el campo es muy pesado. Entonces ellos no están soñando de eso. O sea, la vida no la han vivido así nomás. Saben el trabajo que nosotros hacemos y que todavía hacemos yo y su mamá.

Mrs. Padilla: Se han enseñado a través del trabajo.

Mr. Padilla: Cuando juntos a North Dakota — fuimos dos años al asadón — y llegamos a un [field] (era puro cachorro porque [we] tenemos a limpiar buey shelter y decían las muchachas, “Papá, nos vas a meter allí?”) Y yo les decía: “Es lo que tenemos que hacer. Es el único trabajo que tenemos. Tienen que entrar, y con ganas.” O sea, tenían que aprender que el trabajo no era fácil.

Mr. Padilla: [My children] know exactly that work is not easy. And they know that working in the field is very hard. So they’re not naïve. In other words, they have not lived life just like that. They know the work we did, and the work their mother and I still do.

Mrs. Padilla: They have learned by having to go to work.

Mr. Padilla: When we went to North Dakota — we went for two years to work the hoe [i.e., the sugar beet] — and when we arrived at a field (it was a day because we were going to detasle the sugar beet), the girls would ask, “Papá, are you going to put us in there?” And I would tell them, “That’s what we have to do. It’s the only job we have. You have to do it, and you have to give it your all.” In other words, they had to learn that work wasn’t easy.

For the Padillas, work communicated certain lessons about the hardships of migrant life. They hoped that by taking their children to work they would communicate to them the importance of staying in school, or at least make them realize that their work options would be limited should they choose not to continue their education. In other words, while they always put a high value on school, they never put a negative value on work. On the contrary, the Padillas felt it was important to teach their children the value of school through the medium of hard work. In this regard, work was an important factor in shaping their children’s consciousness and attitudes toward school.

Work to Teach Children the Value of School Although the Padillas felt it was particularly important to teach their children lessons about the migrant lifestyle, education was always their primary concern. The first thing they would do before migrating to another state was to make sure their children asked their teachers to sign the extra work “para que no se atrase,” so that they would not fall behind in their work before arriving at their future school. In addition, when the Padillas arrived at a new location, they would immediately enroll their children at the local school: “Luego luego a la escuela, era lo primero.” Antes de ir al trabajo, iba a matricularlos a la escuela (“Right away to school, it was the first thing. Before going to work, I would enroll them in school.”) “This act, while seemingly routine on the surface, communicated a powerful lesson to the Padilla children about the value of education.

In the following story, Mr. Padilla describes how his oldest boy came to the realization that education was a way out of the long hours and job uncertainties that characterize the truck driving industry (one of Mr. Padilla’s numerous jobs):

El chiquillo le gustaba mucho ir a trabajar conmigo. Y él me decía: “Cuando yo sea grande, yo quiero un troque grande con un motor cuatrocientos y una transmisión tres. Y comencé a creer. Él se dormía allí en donde quería en el troque; allí se quedaba, se cansaba y se dormía. Y yo le decía “oye méjico, éste trabajo es duro. Es muy duro. Agarrar la escuela y vas a ver que vas a pensar diferente.” “No,” me decía “es an sooner a get my CDL license, you gonna buy me a truck?” “Estás loco. No.” Cuando méjico ya cumplió como cañero años, ya noté que él se estaba despegando un poquito. Ya él no me seguía mucho como cuando era niño. Una vez, me ocurrió que yo estaba repartiendo matas, o sea, eran viñas de uva...

The kid used to love going to work with me! And he would say, “When I grow up, I want a big truck with a four hundred horsepower [engine] and a thirteen-speed transmission.” And he started to grow. He would sleep wherever in the truck; he’d get tired and go to sleep. And I would tell him, “Listen son, this is hard work. It’s very hard. Go to school and you’ll see that you’ll think differently.” “No,” he would say, “as soon as I get my CDL license [Commercial Driver’s License], you gonna buy me a truck!” “That’s fine son.” When my son turned fourteen years old, I noticed he began to be a little distant. He didn’t follow me as much, like he used to when he was a boy. One time, I remember I was delivering plants, rather, they were
Era muy temprano y se estaba metiendo el sol. Estaba sentado allí en el driver’s side, y yo estaba cargando unas cargas con un forklift, y me dice “Dad?” Le dije, “¿qué pasó?” “Let’s go, it’s late. What time we gonna be home?” Le dije: “You wanna be a truck driver?” (Laugh) “You gotta do that. I don’t know what time we gonna be home.” “Ah okay,” me dice, “y se sentó pa’trás y yo seguí haciendo mi trabajo. Y después de un rato cuando lo vi, me dice “Dad, I’m gonna follow school. Yo no quiero hacer esto toda mi vida. Tú tienes tu vida, y yo voy a buscar otra.” “Pues tienes tus puertas por delante m’ijo. Eso te lo hemos dicho toda la vida. Van follow school.” (Pausa) ¡N’hombre, me dioz un sentimiento! Estaba bien, pero bien orgulloso de m’ijo.

In this story, Mr. Padilla describes his son’s cognitive transformation from admiring his father’s job as a truck driver to embracing school as a means to avoid working in strenuous, low-paying, and onerous jobs in which time commitments were uncertain. His son developed this consciousness by working with his father, and by witnessing his father’s reality. By sharing his intention to seek another “life,” the son was communicating to Mr. Padilla that he did not want to replicate his father’s work experiences. Mr. Padilla’s response of elation and pride reflects the personal value he placed on education. The fact that his son had learned this powerful lesson provided a sense of deep satisfaction and optimism for Mr. Padilla. He knew that his son would probably not reproduce the history of social and economic suffering that plagues many immigrant families. This accomplishment, therefore, not only confirmed Mr. Padilla’s belief in the educational system, but also reaffirmed his belief that he had done something “right” by taking his child to work.

Work to Learn Life Skills The third lesson the Padillas wanted their children to learn was the manual skills that were developed through migratory labor. The Padillas felt these skills would come in handy if there was ever a fracaso, a failure or breakdown in their children’s education or employment. Should the need arise, their children would be equipped with manual skills they could rely on to find employment. It was the Padilla’s way of making sure their children were prepared for any of life’s unexpected mishaps. Mrs. Padilla illustrates the importance of these skills:

grape vines. It was very late and the sun was setting. He was sitting there in the driver’s side, and I was loading some boxes with a forklift and he tells me, “Dad?” I said, “What happened?” “Let’s go, it’s late. What time we gonna be home?” I told him, “You wanna be a truck driver?” (Laugh) “You gotta do that. I don’t know what time we gonna be home.” “Ah okay,” he said, and he sat back down and I continued to do my job. And after a while when I saw him, he tells me, “Dad, I’m gonna follow school. I don’t want to do this all my life. You have your life, and I’m going to look for another.” “Well you have the doors in front of you son. That’s what we’ve told you all your life. You follow school.” (Pausa) Man I got all choked up! I was very, very proud of my son.

The other day, my sister-in-law told me: “Your children don’t have to do anything. They’re very intelligent and they don’t have to lift a finger.” And I told her, “Just because they’re doing well in school, why shouldn’t they know how to harvest or [how to work the sugar beet] hoe or any of that? What if there’s a failure one of these days? God forbid, but what if there’s a failure? They need to know a little bit of everything.” And they have done it all, thank God. Because they can have money or whatever, but what would happen if they fail tomorrow, or in five or ten years from now? They need to know how to do something in order to get out of that dilemma! That’s why I say, “One needs to know — not everything, but something. That [skill] will get you out of a predicament.”

Mr. and Mrs. Padilla viewed the skills their children learned as migrants not as temporary competencies needed to perform a seasonal job, but as lifelong skills they could employ if needed.

For the Padillas, success did not mean their children should abandon the migrant culture and immerse themselves in the culture of the school. Rather, they believed their children needed to negotiate the terrain of both the home and school cultures and take advantage of the learning opportunities that were offered in both settings. As Mrs. Padilla suggested, the fact that her children were “doing well” in school did not mean they had to entirely abandon work. Although the Padillas fully recognized that there were significant differences between traditional working demands and academic demands, they did not necessarily see them as mutually exclusive or competing.

Taken holistically, “involvement” in the Padilla household was not defined by a number of specific school-driven activities such as PTA/PTO, parent-teacher conferences, or volunteering, but by teaching their children the value of education through the lessons of hard work. Nevertheless, if the Padillas were to be seen through a traditional “involvement lens,” they would appear to be largely uninvolved in their children’s education. This was little formal interaction between the Padillas and their children’s schools, and they rarely (if ever) formally reinforced particular school lessons in the home. However, as their narrative suggests, the Padillas were highly involved in shaping their children’s work ethic and positive orientation toward school.

The Padillas took their children to work because they wanted to teach them particular lessons about the value of schooling and provide them with a
set of skills they could rely on to find employment in the future. It was a lesson that was grounded in the family's social and economic history, coupled with a recognition that their children would not be successful in the United States if they chose to forgo their education.

Toward a Different Understanding of "Involvement"

The concept of parent involvement has historically been defined within certain parameters. In fact, merely mentioning "parent involvement" automatically evokes images of parents in schools performing a scripted set of tasks. What this study demonstrates, however, is that parents, particularly immigrant/migrant parents, may perceive the concept of involvement in a radically different way than educators in schools. The implications of this research, therefore, directly challenge traditional understandings of involvement.

As schools make the transition into the twenty-first century, they will face new and different challenges that place growing demands on school organizations to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. As such, schools will need to establish new ways to effectively promote success for all students. They will no longer be able to rely on a one-size-fits-all approach to parent involvement.

In this rapidly changing social context, schools need to make a greater effort to understand how marginalized parents are negotiating the concept of involvement for themselves so they can effectively "partner" with parents on the parents' own terms. In other words, instead of trying to get marginalized parents involved in specific ways, schools should begin to identify the unique ways that marginalized parents are already involved in their children's education, and search for creative ways to capitalize on these and other subjugated forms of involvement. Indeed, schools need to recognize and validate the culture of the home — including the "funds of knowledge" and belief systems of diverse families (Moll, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) — in order to build better collaborative relationships with parents (Valdés, 1996).

Validating the home cultures of diverse families requires educators to relinquish predetermined involvement typologies that cause marginalized parents to be labeled as "uninvolved." We need, instead, to develop parent involvement programs that are more organic and sensitive to an expanded, as opposed to a limited, definition of involvement. This is particularly critical in

schools that serve large immigrant and/or migrant populations for whom social, economic, linguistic, and health-related needs make it especially difficult for parents to become involved in traditionally sanctioned ways.

References


