

EXPLORING ESL FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

By

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To all of the wonderful ESL families that I have known  
through the years, their stories and lives have been  
and will continue to be my inspiration.

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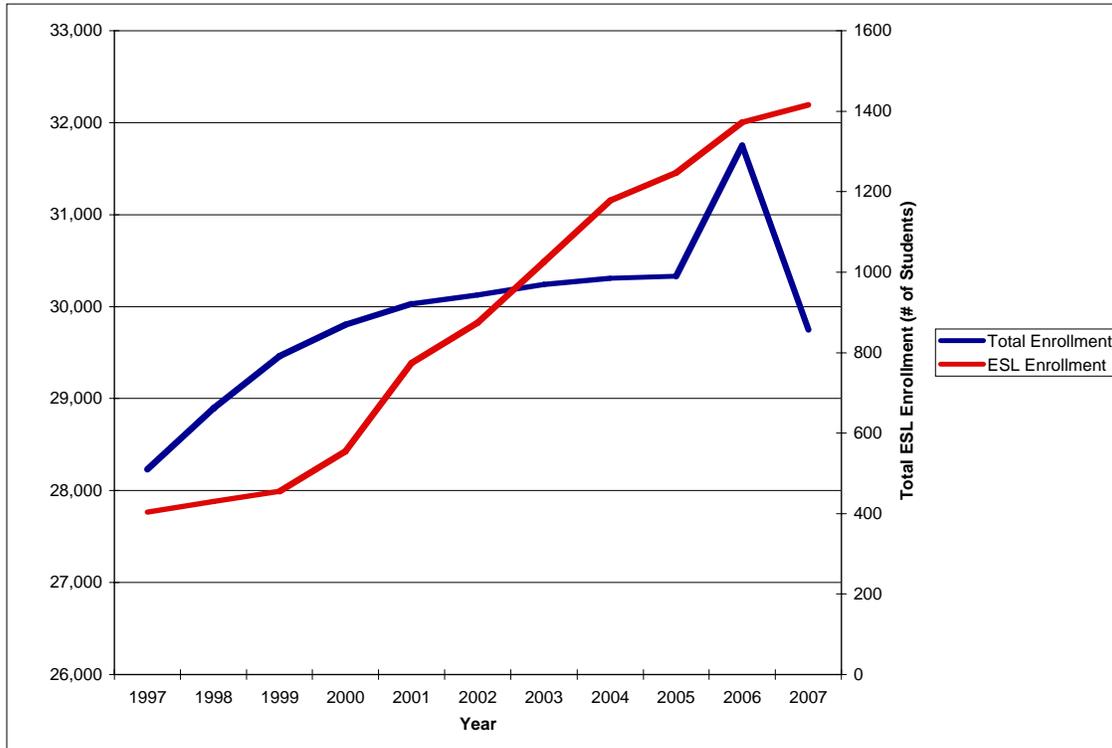
## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Parent involvement in schools has become a topic of great interest in school districts throughout the United States. Many school districts have recognized the need for a strong partnership with parents in order to support students' academic, social, and individual potentials. The link between home, school, and parental involvement is recognized to be very important for students' academic success (Berger, 2000).

As a public school English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher I have been well aware of the changing linguistic and cultural demographics throughout the metropolitan area that I live in. I have been especially cognizant of the growing number of English language learners (ELLs) in the school district that I work in. Figure 1.1 on the following page shows the increase of ELLs in my school district compared with the overall student enrollment in the district over a ten year period (Reis, 2007).

With this change of student demographics in the school district comes the challenge of meeting the needs of the ELLs and their families. This includes finding ways to ensure growing and continuing ESL family involvement in school activities. This chapter introduces the issues that

are associated with ESL family involvement in schools that their children attend.



**Figure 1.1** Rate of ESL Growth for ISD 196 (1997-2007) compared with overall student enrollment.

From: Kim Reis, district 196 student demographer, 2007

### Purpose of the Research

I have worked as an ESL teacher for over five years. During that time I had become cognizant of the fact that very few of my students' families come to the school for any reason other than parent-teacher conferences. There are many other opportunities for family members to participate in at the

school throughout the academic year. These occasions purposely encourage families to be actively involved in the school, yet it has been uncommon for ESL families to engage in them. The purpose of this research is to find out how teachers, ESL students, and ESL families define the role of family involvement in schools. I want to know what needs to change or improve to bring these families into the school so that ELLs can reap the same benefits of family involvement that their native-speaking peers do.

#### Origins of Interest

I can remember as a child that there were not many opportunities for my parents to be involved in the schools that I attended other than occasional PTA meetings. In fact, when I began my career as a teacher in the late 70's, parents were still rarely coming to the school for any reason other than a once a year conference or if their child had been in some kind of trouble. This was typical for a number of years while I was teaching and I did not think much about it until I became a parent and had my first child go to school in 1986.

When my oldest son was born, I decided to take some time off from working as a public school teacher. I taught my son to read and write before he entered kindergarten, so when he did go to school, I wanted to continue to be involved with his education. He attended a public community

school in a suburban Midwest metropolitan area where parents were seen as integral partners with the school and teachers. Parents were invited to volunteer in classrooms regularly. There were committees for all kinds of family events, field trips, fundraisers, and more. In fact at the beginning of the year parents could sign up for as many activities as they wanted (with up to thirty choices). This seemed to me, at the time, like such a novel idea. The culture of the school reached out to all parents, and the majority of parents were visible regularly at the various events year in and year out. As a parent the benefits were great. I knew the teachers and principal on a first name basis; there was the common bond of the children that created a great community spirit. Although there were some ESL families in the school, I cannot speak to their level of participation at school events for the clear majority of families were Euro-American and middle to upper middle class.

When I went back to teaching after a ten year hiatus, I taught in a large urban middle school with demographics of approximately 60% African American, 25% Euro-American, and 15% ESL (Latino 10% and Hmong 5%). It was at this school that I first noticed that the ESL families did not have the same level of participation in general school activities as the rest of the

school families. The ESL families did participate most often (and obviously) at events that emphasized their culture.

Since I began teaching, there has been a paradigm change to include parents in the educational process. The research is clear, parental involvement is a significant contributing factor in student achievement (McCaleb, 1994). As a result public school districts have been involved in finding new ways to engage all parents in their children's school experience (Trumball, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

#### Rationale and Motivation

I work in a large suburban school district in the Midwest. My school has about 600 students, 45 of whom receive ESL services. The school's culture is very similar to the school my own children attended. There are many opportunities for parental involvement, yet few language minority family members come to the school for any reason other than the parent-teacher conferences held twice a year. It has been part of my job to be sure there are interpreters at conferences and to be the liaison for some parent-school communications. After three years of building relationships with families, I felt a growing responsibility to provide more opportunities for ESL families to be a more integral part of the school culture. I wanted to explore ways to encourage and improve ESL family involvement in my school.

I believed that sponsoring school events for the ESL families could help to inspire the process of creating a school environment that encouraged parents to network and connect with one another as well as honoring their cultures and languages. In my suburban school, I felt that there needed to be ongoing activities in the school for ensuring a more inclusive school climate for the families and children that I work with as well as for the whole school culture.

#### Research Biases

I bring to this study four underlying biases. First I believe that my school had not recognized the need to have direct outreach efforts towards ESL families. There had been no advocacy or organization in the building for this to occur nor was there any evidence that there was a concern about it. I also believe that there were no considerations from school personnel to understand cultural differences regarding family involvement within and without the school. There had been numerous comments from staff that implied that ESL families did not seem to care about their children's education. In addition I thought that ESL families wanted to participate more at the school because when I met them at conferences I was acutely aware of their concerns and interests in their children. Finally my personal experiences create an overall bias. I have a history of living and teaching in

culturally and linguistically diverse settings as well as having had classes and staff development that address multicultural understanding. The school I work in which this study is based on has a much less diverse student population than the previous schools I had worked at and the staff has had little or no diversity training.

#### Role as an Insider

At the time of this study I had worked in the school for three years. Establishing relationships with teachers, students and their families may have helped and/or hindered the results of this study. The teachers all knew that I wanted to make changes that would impact ESL family participation in the school. I had also presented an in-service explaining elements of second language acquisition and other information about English language learners. I had worked directly with all of the students who participated in this study and I was able to judge the accuracy and authenticity of the writing that they did. As for the parents, I had established a level of trust from them in the three school years that I had met and spoken with them. Knowing and working with each of the stakeholders involved in this research affects their responses and my interpretation of them.

#### Guiding Questions

In this chapter I have presented the relevance of family involvement in schools. This leads me to my research question, why are many ESL families in my school not participating in school activities? In order to evaluate ESL families' involvement I need to know how teachers define their expectations for ESL families, how students feel about their parents coming to the school, and how families feel about interacting with the school.

Because I work in the school that this study describes, I had daily access to the students that are part of this research and frequent communication with their families. It was not uncommon for me to speak with parents on the phone, write and receive notes to and from them, and even stop by families' homes to relay important information to them. The relationships I had developed with students and their families provided an opportunity to explore the home-school connection in greater depth and accuracy than with an outside researcher. I approach this research with the belief that family involvement plays a critical role in student success.

### Summary

In this study, I focus on aspects of ESL family participation in the schools that their children attend. In the school that I now work, the ESL families are rarely seen at school activities. As the ESL teacher I have been able to connect with my students' families very positively and felt the time

had come to hold school gatherings that would be exclusively for ESL families.

I believe that by implementing some changes, ESL family involvement in my school will improve; the additional benefits may ultimately broaden perspectives for the whole school as well as enhance the educational experience for everyone involved with the school. Possibly the most important factors and motivation for improving the school relationship with language minority families, are English language learners' academic achievement and future success as well as empowering language minority families in the school setting.

### Chapter Overviews

In Chapter One I have introduced my research by establishing the purpose, significance, and need for the study. In the second chapter, I discuss issues regarding ESL family involvement. Some areas I explore are the relationship between student achievement and parent involvement, factors influencing ESL family involvement in schools, and how schools foster multicultural and multilinguistic reception. Chapter three discusses the methods used for this study, chapter four reports the results of the study and chapter five discusses the findings of the research and considers its implications and limitations.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of this research will be to learn about factors that influence ESL family involvement in the schools that their children attend. The literature in this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will present the relationship between student achievement and school and family interactions. The second section explores improving home and school relationships with language minority families. Finally in the third section components that contribute to creating an inclusive multicultural and multilingual school community are presented. These three elements describe the facets of ESL family participation with schools and the multiple effects that they have on the ELLs of the school community.

### Family Involvement and Student Achievement

Student achievement and success in school is the focus for public education throughout the United States. The schools of our inner cities have been at the nexus of cross-cultural awareness for as long as the American public educational system has existed because of the large multicultural

populations in urban areas. In the past several decades urban schools have recognized and have had continuing concern about the underachievement of students who are linguistically and culturally diverse as well as those who are lower socioeconomic students. As schools begin to see their student populations become more diverse, attention has shifted towards understanding the challenges and needs of these diverse learners. This consideration may be initiated because of the achievement gap that has been reflected in falling test scores for cultural and linguistic minorities (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006).

Student achievement is measured in a variety of ways, but most importantly and considerably through high-stakes standardized tests that are given at different grade levels depending on state and federal guidelines. Research has shown that there is a discrepancy between the achievements of students who are from a 'lower' socioeconomic status (SES) to those of a 'higher' socioeconomic status (Alexander & Entwisle, 1994). It is not the case that language minority families always fall into lower SES, but it could hold true that linguistic and cultural barriers create a similar discrepancy of achievement. If poverty *and* language are simultaneous issues, an even greater disparity is possible.

Family disadvantage, which includes lower socio-economic status and/or limited higher education of the adults in the family, translates into educational disadvantage right at the start of children's formal schooling. There is a clear and substantial gap between high and low SES children's test scores from the beginning of students' academic careers and the gap continues to widen throughout the primary and secondary school years. In some American public schools where there is a clear and explicit emphasis on academic success, the achievement gap between the lower and higher SES students is notably decreased. A school environment that is effective in improving achievement for all its students' performances is characterized by high and comprehensible expectations, a disciplined environment, and the need to maintain a sense of community (Alexander & Entwisle, 1994).

High and clear expectations need to be communicated effectively to lower SES families as well as to ESL families. Creating opportunities such as meetings, home visits, or surveys for these parents to learn and ask questions about school expectations could be a very effective means for improving their overall participation in the school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1994). Knowing explicitly that administration and staff is committed to having high standards for every student can help encourage lower SES and ESL families to have aspirations of success in school for their children.

School administration and staff may recognize the importance of inclusiveness for reaching out to all families, but extra steps such as translated notices, involvement of interpreters, and/or extra phone calls may be necessary to actually get ESL and lower SES parents into the school. Once the parents are more comfortable in the school setting they may then be able to be more visible partners in the school setting for their children's academic success (Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994).

Alexander and Entwisle (1994) identified four main factors that affected student achievement. The four include: 1) early childhood interventions such as pre-school screenings and early childhood educational programs, 2) tracking students' academic and social progress in each grade level and reviewing standardized test scores, 3) creating a school environment has a strong social and academic structure, and finally 4) parent involvement with their children both in and out of the school environment.

The first two factors are clearly in the schools' domain, while the succeeding factors impact ESL families and their ability to overcome the cultural and linguistic barriers. Alexander & Entwisle (1994) contend that when these four factors are enacted together they have contributed to narrowing the achievement gap between students of high and low SES.

Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins (1997) claim that achievement for

language minority students did not show dramatic improvement during the 1980's and early 1990's even though many programs had been developed and implemented in public schools. Their conclusion is that there are twelve premises, a term that they use to identify factors that contribute to impacting the achievement gap, to consider for linguistically diverse students and for school districts to adopt in order to see changes in the achievement gap between native and non-native speaking students. The authors adhere to the merits of bilingual education and they believe that these basic premises that they have identified contribute significantly to students' academic success. The ninth premise states that families and community must play a major role in the learning and schooling of children.

Miramontes, et al. (1997) discuss the importance of family interaction with the school, and they contend that parental participation in schooling is positively associated with academic achievement regardless of home language. These researchers state that it is imperative for schools to foster partnerships with families whose home language may not be English in order to enhance children's education. Encouraging the relationship between school staff and language minority families may be difficult at first in schools where there has not been a lot of cultural or linguistic diversity, but committing to outreach for these families is vital for all constituents.

Miramontes, et al. (1997) believe that there can be one key factor that is most difficult to overcome for ESL families. This factor is that there is a great possibility that language minority parents may view the teacher as in a position of power. Because of this, the responsibility for dynamic communication and outreach fall upon the teacher. The more the teacher can make positive communication with ESL families, the more comfortable the ESL parents may feel towards the school as a whole. This enables families to believe they can be instrumental in their children's academic success. Outreach efforts that are tied to a school's vision for student achievement require a commitment to collaboration. According to McCaleb (1994), the most successful school embraces the joint collaboration of teachers, students, and families. Families must be seen as an asset in the schooling process and all families regardless of socio-economic status, race, language, or culture can be regarded as important contributors to their children's success and to their children's school (Sanchez, Sutton, & Ware, 1991).

Goldenberg & Sullivan (1994) state that language and immigration add several dimensions to a child's at-risk status. At-risk refers to the obstacles students face such as academic achievement, literacy, and the ability and desire to finish high school. Some of the expectations and assumptions like

PTSA meetings, field trips, class parties, or attending school programs that are built into a school's culture may seem extraneous to some immigrant parents. The idea of parent participation at the school or within the framework of school can be a major hurdle for many ESL families. When families are not participating at the school their children attend, there can be a negative outcome for student achievement. ESL parents may have no awareness of this connection due to factors that include the obvious language barrier and the not so obvious cultural barriers.

Cultural barriers can include the perceptions of parents' own school experiences, family or work responsibilities, and feelings of powerlessness. Many immigrant parents have come from countries where there is a clear delineation of responsibilities between the parent and the school, and it would be highly unlikely for these parents to consider being on the same level as the teacher (Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994). It is necessary for educators to recognize these barriers and to be sensitive to them, and then to work with school and community resources to make efforts to interact with the parents. Without such efforts to break down cultural barriers, the achievement gap between students who are non-native speakers with native-speakers could continue to be an issue throughout school districts nation wide.

Carreon, Drake, & Barton (2005) discuss the importance of immigrant parental presence at their children's schools. In their recent study they describe the experiences of several limited English parents as they engage in their children's schools. The researchers found that although initially parents are often very satisfied with the schools that their children attend, they can be challenged by the barriers of language when needing to request information from a teacher or to advocate for their children.

The lack of a parent's ability for communicating and understanding English can impact the power structure of a family. It is not uncommon that the power can shift to the children as they are often in the position for translating communications from the school to their parents and from their parents to the school. In addition, parents can be at a great disadvantage in having a limited understanding of the power structure that is embedded in the school culture as well as not having a clear understanding of their rights as parents within the school and the expectations that the school has for them. It is not uncommon for an immigrant parent to feel isolated when it comes to engaging in their children's school and this can lead to the perception of being disrespected (Carreon et al., 2005).

Parental involvement for many immigrant families begins at home. Despite what some educators may believe, ESL families value education and

they support their children's schooling in many ways (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). The support may not look like the average white middle-class standard, so it can easily be misunderstood by those unaware of cultural differences. In many immigrant households activities revolve around the business of maintaining a sense of family. This includes providing a caring home environment with moral parameters, getting help on homework from a family member, celebrations with extended family, cooking together, or doing things together as a family in the home.

Parents often encourage their children to do well and stay in school through describing their own personal hardships and sacrifices. They want their children to have happy and productive lives just as native-speaking parents do. The connection of children to their family's history imparts the expectations that correspond to the same expectations of the school (Delgado-Gaitan,2004).

Educational achievement for language minority students begins with a strong family core; school districts and educators can find ways that honor diversity of culture and confirm and promote parental participation at home and school. Committing to these ideals can lead to facilitating the narrowing of the achievement gap (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

### Improving Home and School Relationships

School districts across the United States face the challenge of preparing an increasingly diverse generation for which literacy is a must (Sanchez, 1991). More and more, families need to help prepare their children to have options and flexibility for the possibility of changing careers in their adulthood. Sanchez maintains that with the competitiveness of globalization and the potential survival of our nation, it is imperative that educators and parents work together to face the challenge of educating students in this millennium. Schools will not be able to adequately address the issue of educating children without involving families in the process and this definitively includes immigrant parents whether they can speak English or not (Berger,2000).

Parents and schools working together may seem like a clichéd mantra, but the fact is that reciting this mantra does not necessarily become the action. As for the current status of public education and the high stakes of student achievement, it is educators and families who will need to come to terms with the reality of working together and overcome whatever obstacles there may be to achieving this collaborative effort (Sanchez, 1991).

Delgado-Gaitan (2004) and Berger (2000) expound on the importance that communication between the school and parents can positively influence the relationship. Teachers and other school staff must recognize

that relaying information to parents is only half of the communication equation; the other half is listening to parents. This of course is foundational to any good relationship or partnership. Key to communication is not only to be the imparter of information, but to be a listener of parental concerns, questions, and input of the people who know the topic of discussion (the child) the best.

Educators need to recognize that communication with immigrant families is parallel to that of communication with non-immigrant families. Student learning is the center point of this communication, for immigrant families are just as interested in their children's academic achievement and social growth as a non-immigrant parent. It is up to the school, classroom and ESL teachers especially because of the close work they do with students, to make every effort to connect with the non-English speaking parents at the beginning of the school year and at intervals throughout the school year. This is necessary in order to reiterate the expectations that the school may have and to listen to the parents' ideas for their children's success in the school (Berger, 2000).

Culturally and linguistically diverse families are often alienated from the school system for a variety of reasons including: 1) lack of English skills, 2) lack of understanding the home school partnership, 3) lack of confidence,

4) lack of understanding how the school system works, 5) work interference, 6) negative past experiences in schools, and 7) the insensitivity and hostility on the part of school personnel (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996). My school operates under the assumption that the above factors are not concerns for the majority of the families that have children in attendance. Through the time of this research, there have been no modifications or considerations for ESL families and their personal situations or experiences. With these factors in mind it would seem to be important for there to be extra efforts made by school personnel to have in place strategies to help these diverse families feel welcomed from the first moments they enter the school environment. It could also be critical for school personnel to be aware of the elements such as lack of English skills or understanding how a school system works that hinder communication between the school and the language minority families.

An onsite resource room for ESL families creates a school environment that encourages a greater parental presence in the school (Berger, 2000). A resource area that welcomes parents during school hours allows parents to have a reason to be more visible in the school. The idea of a resource room encourages a sense of community where families can find information about parenting, child development, and resources for helping them assist

children with school, learn about community events as well as a connection for community resources. A resource room in the school for ESL families can help facilitate these families to have a greater sense of partnership with the school (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

In order to assist with reaching out to the immigrant families certain considerations may need to be made. One such consideration is holding both evening and early morning parent-teacher conferences to accommodate the different work schedules that some families may have (Sanchez, 1991). For many people it is difficult to take time off from their work to attend a school conference. The ESL parent may lose much needed pay if they were to miss any work. Although there are state laws that allow for time off from a job to attend a school conference, some ESL parents may not know how to approach an employer to request time off to attend a parent-teacher conference.

Another issue to consider is having childcare available at school functions for younger siblings. The idea of having a babysitter come to their home to care for younger children may not be an option for cultural or financial reasons for many immigrant families. For many cultures around the world it would be very unusual to not bring your children where ever

you go, in fact including younger siblings is a source of pride for the older child who attends the school (Sanchez, 1991).

Some school districts may also want to have parent education classes or adult ESL classes available in the school buildings in the evening or other times when there is space available in the building. Adults coming for parent classes can learn how to help their children with learning activities or just attend English classes. This could help the adults to become more familiar with the school and also demonstrate that the school is a place for everyone to learn (Sanchez, 1991). If there are newer to country families, these strategies are doubly important for outreach efforts.

Home visits are effective in easing the school and family relationship (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Just as in the school environment where the school would have an interpreter if needed that would be true for a home visit as well. Home visits can lead to a greater understanding between teachers and their students and the students' families. In many cultures it is a great honor to have a teacher come to the home and it can demonstrate the reciprocal that the teacher has honored the family and the family's culture. This can open the door for greater respect and cooperation from both constituents (Berger, 2000).

Home visits are the most effective way to initially communicate with language minority families. A home visit gives the unique opportunity to make personal contact and for many cultures this is seen as an open door to a relationship. Another benefit of home visits is that children are able to see their parents and teachers together in the comfortable setting of the home and they recognize that the common interest is them. The more visible the contact between family members and teachers the more potential there is for cooperation and collaboration in creating an improved relationship overall (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins, 1997).

According to Delgado-Gaitan (2004) there is much more to improving school and home relationships with immigrant families than translating everything into the home language. Inviting parents to come into school for a special lesson about their culture where they can participate or communicating positive reports on a regular basis can do a lot to improve the relationship. School staff must go out of their way to be welcoming immigrant families into the school community, for example, greeting parents in their primary language. This simple gesture can help to break down the perceived walls of separation and show the parents that there is an interest in making communication easier. Parents are looking for very clear and explicit experiences to interact with and respond to.

Educators may believe that they have done enough in recognizing diversity in their schools by reading a story about Chinese New Year, doing a Hmong art project, or learning a song for Cinco de Mayo. The efforts towards including and embracing immigrant families must be a part of a school's daily activity plan (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). If there are students in a school of different than the majority culture, every effort should be made to find curriculum and materials such as literature, posters, or artifacts that are inclusive and woven throughout the grade levels. It is important that a child sees herself represented at the place where she is spending the majority of her days. At the beginning of a school year, school staff members might want to look around and make themselves intentionally aware of who is in their school, not to single students or cultures out, but to have a consciousness about and sensitivity for all of students and families in the school community (Berger, 2000).

Delgado-Gaitan (2004) contends that efforts such as a resource room, home visits, and explicit invitations to ESL parents demonstrate a more inclusiveness and receptiveness towards immigrant families. These efforts help to make inroads towards a concerted cooperative community with all families. Furthermore administrators and teachers can encourage language minority students and their families to share their life experiences and to be

visible stakeholders to broaden awareness for the school as a whole thus enhancing the goal of education.

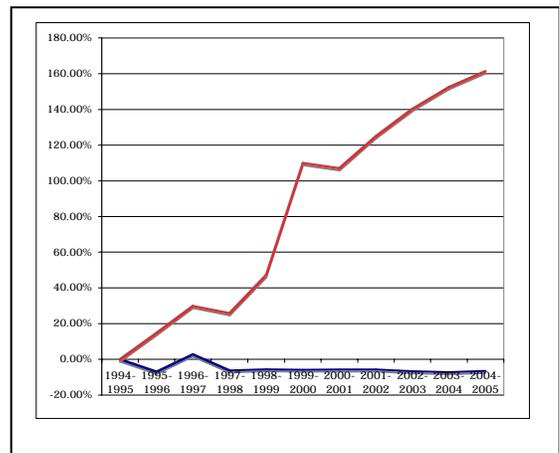
The presence of ESL students in some districts' schools may still be novel enough to not have altered accommodations to be implemented in their out reach efforts. In areas where there has not been advocacy or leadership to affect change and sensitivity towards immigrant families, there can be preconceived ideas about immigrant students not being able to achieve academic excellence as well as an underlying anti-immigrant sentiment towards the parents (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Such sentiment could be reflected in conversations amongst school staff when they criticize the manner in which they hear immigrant parents speak to their children or when no effort is taken to find out more about a family's personal background. Some educators have the opinion that parents not educated in the United States, or those who speak only another language, are deficient in their ability to support their children in school (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

These ideas can be perpetuated through ignorance or lack of experience with ESL families. Unfortunately such attitudes may negatively impact the family and school relationship. Language minority family members are as perceptive about the way in which they are spoken to as a native born

English speaking middle class American. Negative body language, negative tone and attitude, or lack of engaging with parents can cause a divide for immigrant families and the school. Parents can easily sense if school personnel are disapproving or judgmental and this certainly leads to parents becoming discouraged with being involved at the school (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Figure 2.1 shows the growth of ELLs in the state of Minnesota between the school years 1994-1995 and 2004-2005 compared with the total student enrollment in the state during the same period. This figure shows that total student enrollment had been declining while the LEP (Limited English Proficient, another acronym used for ELLs) enrollment has more than doubled within the decade.

	Total Enrollment	Growth from 94-95	ESL Enrollment	Growth from 94-95
1994-1995	896,538	0.0%	21,738	0.0%
1995-1996	834,414	-6.9%	24,962	14.8%
1996-1997	921,678	2.8%	28,237	29.9%
1997-1998	839,823	-6.3%	27,337	25.8%
1998-1999	847,305	-5.5%	31,980	47.1%
1999-2000	844,800	-5.8%	45,640	110.0%
2000-2001	845,040	-5.7%	45,012	107.1%
2001-2002	845,700	-5.7%	48,880	124.9%
2002-2003	836,849	-6.7%	52,244	140.3%
2003-2004	832,040	-7.2%	54,878	152.5%
2004-2005	838,503	-6.5%	56,829	161.4%



**Figure 2.1 Rate of ESL Growth in Minnesota 1994/1995-2004/2005 in context to total student enrollment in Minnesota public schools during the same time period.**

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From The Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students. 2006.

ESL families can either come to feel at home in or alienated from their children's schools depending on the ways that the school and its staff interact with them. Some of the biggest impediments that can cause alienation are inadvertent, such as asking questions that may be considered personal to some cultures, gesturing in a way that may be culturally offensive, or making recommendations about an ELL too soon in the parent-teacher relationship. The challenge of being perceived as alienating or embracing may not be obvious without delving more into learning more about the cultures of the students in the school. A conscientious effort to create culturally sensitive school environments such as having books, multicultural artifacts and student projects throughout the school can help families be more comfortable ( Trumball, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

Trumball et al. (2001) explain that there are times when the cultural barriers and misunderstandings lie within the structure of classroom interactions. The classroom structural expectations may in fact be in violation of some cultural norms. The dominant American culture orients

children at a very young age to be independent while many cultures do not value independence but do value socialization and interdependence. A child from Somalia or Mexico may speak more about their interpersonal experiences while a native English-speaking child may be attuned to the physicality of things.

Another example of cultural conflict in the classroom would be the value of sharing among many immigrant cultures. In many American classrooms children are expected to have their own school supplies, while some immigrant cultures do not value the idea of personal property (Trumball et al, 2001). In American classrooms it is very common for the teacher to elicit student ideas and opinions. Again this is at odds with many immigrant cultures in that it would be considered disrespectful for a child to share an opinion with an adult.

Trumball et al. (2001) define cultures in two basic categories; those that are individualistic and those that are collectivistic. The dominant culture of power in U.S. schools is more aligned with the individualistic emphasis, while approximately 70% of the world's cultures are collectivistic. This cultural difference could be a factor in obstructing home and school relationships. While individualistic cultures value working independently, cognitive skills, and positive self-esteem; collectivistic cultures emphasize

working in a group, social skills, and criticizing their children for normative behavior. In fact, a parent from a collectivistic culture is very uncomfortable when hearing praise about their child(ren). Also in individualistic cultures, educators expect parents to be involved in teaching their children while the collectivistic cultures believe it is the teacher's role to do all the educating with regards to academics. This is a big conflict for many immigrant families and teachers. Teachers have remarked to me that the ESL parents seem not to value education while the same ESL parents have wondered why their child comes home and needs their help with projects when they have been in school for 6 or more hours.

In the suburban school in which I work, a monthly newsletter goes home to parents to remind them of the many ways they should be helping their children at home throughout the month. The newsletter informs families that there are assignments that are to be done at home with no school time for it at all. The assumption is that the parents will help and work with the child to get the work done to return to school on the date that it is due.

The consideration that ESL/immigrant families may have a culturally different emphasis than that of school culture, may contribute to greater difficulty in encouraging parental involvement (de Carvalho, 2000) in the

same sense and assumption as that of non-immigrant parents. With this in mind, it is important for schools to make a concerted effort to include all families and to understand more about the cultures of their immigrant students and how it impacts the home-school relationship.

### Epstein's Categories of Parent Involvement

Epstein (1992), identifies five categories of parent school involvement and participation. The five categories of involvement are: 1) meeting their child's basic needs for getting to school, 2) communicating with school staff about their children, 3) being supportive of learning activities in the home, 4) volunteering in their child's school, and 5) being involved at the decision making level of the school.

The first area of involvement is meeting a child's basic needs for getting to school. This would include providing or acquiring transportation, school supplies, ensuring adequate sleep, clothing, and food. Another area is to communicate with school staff; relaying information to school personnel regarding a child's health and academic history, responding to school forms, written correspondences, and/or telephone calls. If a parent does not understand something that is happening in a classroom or in the school, they should feel able to be in contact with whoever is concerned. The third area of parent participation is being supportive of learning activities at home;

helping with homework, checking on assignments and work that children have brought home. It may also include interacting through conversation and inquiry about events and activities that a child has been involved in at school. The fourth area of involvement for parents is to be a volunteer at your child's school. Volunteering could be anything from reading a story, helping with a school project, assisting teachers with paperwork, planning parties, or making phone calls. Finally, parents could be involved with participating on committees that impact the school as a whole such as a site council, PSTA membership, or other committees or boards that somehow govern the school or event of the school district.

It can be a new cultural concept or at minimum a challenge to navigate when schools reach out to immigrant families and include them as partners in the education of their children (Epstein, 1992). The keys to having successful family school relationships are connecting with families so that parents feel included in their children's education. It is important for families and schools to share information (families learning about the school and the school learning about the families), and communicate with each other to support the foundation that school and family build for children (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Creating a Culturally Diverse School Community

ESL students are often caught between two distinct worlds (Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, 1995). An ELL's family and cultural community life provide them with a rich history and a connection with people who hold many shared fundamental values and experiences. The ESL child's school world often revolves around concepts and ideas that are greatly disconnected from their home life and may even be contradictory in values and experiences. As the demographics around the country change and school districts from rural to urban environments have greater numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse families, a common ground needs to be created so that families can contribute to the school and the school can contribute to the family.

Culture is often overlooked in understanding why or why not families become actively involved in their children's education. It is often assumed that immigrant families want to and can easily acculturate to American school expectations. Such assumptions can perpetuate negativity towards immigrant families when school staff does not sense a quick assimilation of the school expectations (Trumball et al., 2001). Classroom teachers and administrators may realize that immigrant families face an adjustment period, but they seldom realize all the implications that are involved. An adjustment period may take years depending on affective factors such as

whether families have fled from a war zone, emigrated from a refugee camp, been sponsored by a friend or organization, or if they are in the United States without documentation.

Regardless of the circumstances for being in the United States, many immigrant families are in the mode of survival and may not have any time or even the perception that they should be trying to figure out all the expectations that schools presume (McCaleb, 1994). Cummins (1994) responds to McCaleb stating that "...if the ability to speak English and have knowledge about North American cultural conventions are made prerequisites for parental involvement, then many ESL parents would be defined as apathetic and incompetent..." (p. 198).

Creating a school environment that does not put the demands of assimilating quickly on immigrant families can be the first step in truly opening the doors for families to be involved with the school. The school can initiate an inclusive school climate for cultural and linguistic diversity and open the doors to greater understanding for all parties (Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, 1995).

ESL parents are the first and most important teachers of their children. Weinstein-Shr & Quintero (1995) explain that the breakdown for some ESL families to feel adequate in participating in school activities is literacy in

their first language and of English. Schools can help parents strengthen their literacy skills by sponsoring workshops, to have forums that help families to understand how they can help their children with homework and school activities, and accessing information about ESL classes and citizenship classes for the parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). These steps can help to bring more focus and visibility to the forefront of the school's consciousness, setting in motion the creation of an environment that recognizes the needs of its growing multicultural population.

Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commins (1997) describe the need to have organized outreach that engage parents in meaningful ways to develop, sustain and enhance mutual trust between immigrant families and schools. They also contend that it is not just the parents but whole families that need to be welcomed into schools where immigrant children attend. When schools make the efforts to engage families in activities such as those described above, the outcome can contribute to bridging the family world with the greater society. This connectivity can promote family strength and can help to build a solid sense of community.

A crucial component to embracing and recognizing the multicultural reality of schools, the United States, and the world is to infuse curriculum to initiate greater awareness (McCaleb, 1994). McCaleb presents a literacy

project that promotes multicultural respect and awareness in the school setting as well as encouraging all language modalities for ESL students and their families. The project involves children writing about their families' personal histories and sharing the finished projects in the classroom. The parents, whether they are literate or not, are engaged in describing their life experiences with their children and the children record the stories that their family members share with them. The sharing of this project in the classroom contributes to greater understanding between families' similarities and differences, which is a goal of having a multicultural, inclusive curriculum.

Empowering the home culture in school can play a very important role in how children perceive their parents commitment to education thus encouraging school success. When families share their values within the school context there is an opportunity for validation of their cultures and students begin to recognize that their families can be a part of their school lives. Children can combine the two worlds that they inhabit when the school culture opens itself to learning about all of the home cultures that its students are from (McCaleb, 1994).

Before schools expect that immigrant families will come to understand American school culture and all of its intricacies it may be better to come to

the conclusion that it would do a school community well to reach out to all of its families. Immigrant families can be vulnerable and certainly overwhelmed with all of the changes they need to adjust to in a new country and culture. Schools can be the place where families can go not only for their children to acclimate, but also for the adults to learn about American culture and to have a certain amount of support (Weinstein-Shr & Quintero, 1995).

### Summary

There are many aspects to understanding and encouraging ESL family involvement at the school their children attend. Throughout the United States each year there are increasing populations of children who are English learners that are coming into schools and this trend is likely to continue for the years to come. When school communities can recognize the challenges that culturally and linguistically diverse families are faced with as they come into United States schools, they can put into place a variety of support networks to honor and welcome families. Such framework offers ESL families a better chance to become partners with educators for the success and achievement of their children.

Although there is important research presenting the multifaceted issues surrounding school involvement and immigrant families, a gap exists on

understanding how ESL family involvement is perceived by teachers and families. In this study I set out to answer my research question, Why are many ESL families not participating in school activities? I will find out how teachers define their expectations for ESL families, how ESL families feel about interacting with my school, and how students feel about their parents coming to the school. The following chapter describes the methodology I use to help me answer these questions.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Studies have suggested that family involvement in schools is an essential element for student achievement as well as a fundamental constituent of creating a school community. In this research I want to know, why are many ESL families in my school not participating in school activities? This

study is designed to explore the perceptions of teachers, students and families regarding home-school participation.

This study draws from three different research tools; an open-ended questionnaire, student writing journal entries, and individual interviews. As part of the research I explore the interaction between home and school from three different perspectives; teachers, students and families.

This chapter describes the methodologies used in this study. First the rationale and description of the research design is presented along with a description of the qualitative paradigm grounding this study. The method used to collect data from each procedure is identified under teacher questionnaire, student journals or family interviews. Finally I will describe how I verified the data and the ethical considerations that I employed while analyzing each procedure.

### Research Paradigm

The qualitative research paradigm is often used in educational research because of the accessible natural context of a classroom or a group of students. The elements of qualitative research include working directly with people, little disruption of a natural setting, looking at issues from several perspectives, and interpreting peoples' experiences. Qualitative research is open-ended and exploratory, looking to understand the people that the

inquiry is based upon. Educators often use qualitative research because the data can be directly applied and used to bring about positive change in educational practice (Merriam, 1998).

This is a qualitative research study. Questionnaires, interviews, and writing journal entries are used to examine the research question from three different perspectives. This provides triangulation in the study as well as more convincing and credible results (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). In using these tools, I was able to identify common themes that were shared amongst each group of participants.

I choose open-ended questions for the questionnaire, writing journal entries and interview. Open-ended questions offer the participants to take their time with their answers and allow the researcher to obtain more information to evaluate (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). In addition the use of open-ended questionnaires or interview questions can often provide a greater richness of information (Dörnyei, 2003).

## Data Collection

### Teacher Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to identify the expectations teachers had for ESL family participation. There were four open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' opinions about their experiences with ESL family

involvement. The questionnaires were answered on hard copies and were anonymous to ensure the most honest and direct answers. (Dörnyei, 2003). The questions were: 1) What do you think the most important things ESL parents need to know to help their children in school?, 2) What are your basic expectations for ESL parent involvement?, 3) What would you like the ESL teachers to do to help improve ESL parent participation?, and 4) What do you think the barriers are for ESL parents to participate in more school events?.

Participants: In June 2006 the questionnaire was put in the school mailboxes of 26 classroom teachers, kindergarten and fifth grade, and twenty completed questionnaires were returned to me (see Appendix A). The teachers in the school consisted of twenty-two females and four males and all these teachers are Euro-Americans. Each of these teachers had had English learners in their classrooms within the previous two years and during the school year 2005-2006 all but two had ELLs in their classrooms. In addition each of these teachers had held conferences with and met one or more adults from ESL students' families. About half of the teachers had been teaching at the school for over ten years, some as long as twenty, and the other half had taught between one and ten years at the school.

#### Student Writing Journals

Journal writing is a non-threatening task that allows students to express their personal thoughts (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). Each of my students has a personal journal that they use weekly. Students often are free to write on any topic they choose, but there are other times that I give writing prompts. The familiarity that students have with journal writing insures that responses are authentic and natural.

Parents were given an informed consent letter explaining that the student journal responses were going to be used as part of this research (see Appendix B). All forms were returned, and in April 2006 sixteen third through fifth graders were given a writing prompt about their parents' involvement in the school. The prompt used for the journal response was, Describe the last time that your parent(s) came to school. Explain why they were at school and how you felt about their visit. Give as much detail as you can about your memory.

Participants: The English language learners that responded to this question are from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds that include Mexican, Ecuadorian (Spanish), Indian (Gujarati), Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese (Mandarin), Somali, Lebanese (Arabic), Ukrainian (Russian and Ukrainian), and Philippino (Tagalog). All but one of these students had been in the United States for over 3 years. The one student who was new to

country had learned some English in her home country and by April of 2006 was proficient enough to participate in this study.

All the students in the study receive ESL services and are fluent English speakers according to the IPT oral proficiency test and the Minnesota SOLOM, which measure listening and speaking skills. However each student's reading and writing proficiencies fall behind their oral/aural skills. Regardless, the students were able to write sufficiently to answer the writing journal prompt.

### Parent Interviews

Interviews are used in qualitative research because they are the most informative way to get perspectives from participants. Interviewing can explore a person's feelings and thoughts in regards to their personal experiences, and in this case in the school setting (Patton, 2001). The interviews consisted of a series of questions divided into three areas. 1) back-ground questions, 2) questions about their children in the school, and 3) questions about their personal experiences with the school.

I conducted seven interviews with ESL parents between July 15, 2006 and October 15, 2006. In June of 2006 I wrote a letter to families requesting volunteers to be interviewed. I had letters translated into Russian and Spanish, two languages of which I knew that some of the

parents from these backgrounds could not read any English. Three families responded to the letters and became my initial interviewees. I felt that three families was too few and wanted to have between five and seven total for this part of my research. When I did not receive any other responses, I decided that I needed to take the extra step and call families at their homes. I knew that I needed to carefully relay the purpose of the interviews and insure families of the voluntary nature of the interviews.

Telephoning proved to be better than the letter writing, and I was able to get four more families who consented to being interviewed. The seven families that agreed to participate to be interviewed were a sample of convenience because of the relationship I had developed with them during the previous years. The families that I called were particularly a sample of convenience because I considered which families may be more available to meet with me due to work schedules and other family obligations.

A week before conducting the first interview, I field tested the interview questions two separate times with colleagues who had immigrated to the U.S. within the previous five years. This was done to ensure clarification of the questions, to get feedback, and to have the experience with recording and timing the meeting.

Five of the interviews were held in the school building when school was not in session, either during the summer or after school hours. Two of the interviews were held in the homes of the families being interviewed. The interviews averaged 45 minutes. Six of the interviews were done with one of the parents from a family and the seventh was with both parents. Two families required an interpreter although they speak some English, I was concerned they would not be able to understand and respond to the questions comfortably or successfully. In each of the other interviews I rephrased and repeated questions when needed.

The interviews were recorded with a digital tape recorder, which is very small and unobtrusive, increasing the comfort of the interviewees. Recordings were downloaded onto a computer disc and then manually transcribed verbatim.

Each interview consisted of the same series of questions. The questions were sequential in the sense that one question logically led to the next question. I wanted to create the essence of a conversation so the questions were developed with a deliberate order. The beginning questions were a warm-up to the subsequent questions so that the participants would become more at ease with answering (Merriam, 1998). This procedure

worked well, several participants elaborated quite extensively on questions and provided more information than I had anticipated.

Parent Participants: The parents who were interviewed all had been in the United States for a minimum of three years and/or had had affiliation with the school from school years 2005-2006 and before. In all I had one Ukranian (Russian) family, two Vietnamese (Vietnamese) families, two Mexican (Spanish) families, one Chinese (Mandarin) family, and one family from India (Gujarati) for my interviews. Each of these families had had their child or children enrolled for a minimum of one school year and one had had a child in the school for six years.

### Setting

This study took place at a suburban elementary school in the Midwest. During the school year 2005-2006, there were approximately 31,000 students enrolled in the district and approximately 1,300 received ESL services. In the school under study there are 612 students. The majority of students are white and middle to upper-middle class. Approximately 15% of the student body receives free or reduced lunch, based on economic need. Forty-five students receive ESL service and are of varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The school has had a significant increase in English language learners over the previous three school years. During the 2002-

2003 school year only 12 students received ESL services. Since then the growth of English language learners is about 400% in just three years. Class sizes in the school are maintained at 25 students. There are many programs within the school to help meet the range of students' learning needs.

An additional factor that was considered as part of my research is that the school holds about 25 scheduled annual events (not including grade level field trips). Family members are initially aware of these events via a school calendar that is issued to all families at the beginning of the school year (see Appendix Q). Subsequent notices through grade-level monthly newsletters and/or handouts are sent home. The events that are noted in the calendar are relevant to this study because it is these activities that I based my research question on. For the two school years before this research was conducted, it was my first hand observation that only a few ESL parents attended any of these scheduled events.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis of each procedure took place shortly after the completion of the collection of data. After all three procedures were analyzed individually I discovered the common themes of them collectively. Identifying common themes amongst the methods helps to establish the validity and the consistency of the research (Merriam, 1998).

### Teacher Questionnaire

Each completed questionnaire was read to get an essence of the teacher responses. Then I cut up each questionnaire and created piles for each question. This allowed me to find common themes and cluster responses accordingly. Because most of the respondents gave more than one suggestion or comment in each question, I created a chart to record multiple answers, tallying responses on the chart as I went through each answer. This insured multiple responses were included in their appropriate categories. The purpose for this procedure was to identify common themes that were referenced in the responses.

### Writing Journal Entries

I read each student's response to the journal prompt and then made copies of them in order to code and mark them. Each response told a different story about the students' personal experiences. I color coded types of responses: green reflected students' feelings regarding a family visit to the school; blue identified the reasons for the family visit. After color coding, I separated green statements on students' feelings regarding family visits into positive and negative responses. Family reasons for school visits, the blue coding, were divided into obligatory and nonobligatory categories. Obligatory visits consisted of an adult family member meeting with a

teacher for a regular parent-teacher for a conference or a meeting specifically requested by a teacher. Nonobligatory visits included all other reasons an adult family member came to the school, such as a grade level activity or class party.

### Parent Interviews

I listened to each recorded interview shortly after they were conducted to check the quality of the recordings. When all interviews had been completed, I put them on compact discs and then each interview was transcribed verbatim. Once the transcriptions were complete, I studied the transcripts identifying themes. Color coding was used to isolate key words, phrases, or sentences that relayed opinions, feelings, values, and perspectives. I put all coded responses on poster boards to examine the prominent threads among the respondents.

I extracted six recurring themes. They were communication (yellow), school climate (green), student achievement (blue), respect (purple), inclusiveness (pink), and confusion (orange). I put all the colored comments on poster board in order to visually examine what the prominent threads were amongst the seven respondents.

Although reliability in qualitative research is difficult to confirm because human behavior is active, there is agreement amongst some researchers

that consistency and dependability are attainable (Merriam, 1998). Reading the answers to the questionnaires, journal responses and transcripts of the interviews multiple times, I consistently extracted the same themes in my analysis of the data that was collected.

### Verification of Data

Several strategies were used to enhance internal validity for this study. First, the access I had to the teachers in my school, the students and some of their parents granted me samples of convenience although each participant agreed to be part of this study voluntarily. In addition the methodologies that I used allowed me to triangulate and helped me to have a wider understanding of my findings (Merriam, 1998). Finally, I needed to consider that there was a certain level of bias especially when analyzing the student and parent responses. This was because I could identify who wrote what and who said what in using the journal entries and interview answers. Considering these strategies contributed to a more realistic understanding of what I was analyzing in this research.

### Ethics

Although interviewing as well as journaling characteristically imposes on the participants, every step in this study was taken to insure privacy and protection for them (Dörnyei, 2003). The following protective measures were

used in this research: 1) a Human Subjects Research form was submitted, reviewed and accepted by Hamline faculty, 2) the school district gave me permission to perform the research, 3) teachers and parents were sent informed consent letters; parents who were interviewed signed for themselves and parents signed for students who participated in the journal writing, 4) the research objectives were explained to all participants, 5) there was no undue pressure to participate, 6) participants' identities were protected at all steps in the research process, 7) there were no negative or positive consequences as a result for participating in this study, 8) the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and 9) all research materials and notes were kept in a secure location at all times.

I collected data from three sources: parents, students, and teachers. Gathering data from different participants in the family-school triangle provided a more comprehensive understanding of perspectives regarding ESL family participation. The information from the teachers would give me an idea of how teachers viewed ESL family participation in the school. The students' journals were important because they would inform me how the children perceived their parents' attendance at school events. If their parents began to feel more of a part of the school's culture, the impact and benefits for student success could be great. By conducting interviews with

parents I wanted to find out how they felt about interacting at my school. Finding common themes from the data of the three tools may be used to inform me in making future decisions for the families.

The next chapter presents the results of this study. The themes from the teacher questionnaire, the students' writing journal entries and the parent interviews are discussed.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In chapter three I described the three data collection procedures that I used for this study. The three methodologies I used were 1) a teacher questionnaire, 2) student writing journal entries, and 3) parent interviews. Each procedure was useful in understanding some of the issues that could help guide me to answering my research question, why are many of the ESL families in my school not participating in school activities? This chapter presents the results of the methodologies used for this research. In studying my results I am hopeful of positively impacting and improving ESL family involvement in the school that I work.

In the section of student journal entries, the misspellings are those of the students. This is done to maintain the authenticity of each student's writing.

### Teacher Questionnaire

The teacher questionnaire consisted of the following 4 open-ended questions that were designed to help me understand classroom teacher expectations for ESL families:

- 1) What do you think the most important things ESL parents need to know to help their children in school?
- 2) What are your basic expectations for ESL parent involvement?
- 3) What would you like the ESL teachers to do to help improve ESL parent participation?
- 4) What do you think the barriers are for ESL parents to participate in more school events?

This questionnaire was given in June 2006 to the twenty-six kindergarten through fifth grade classroom teachers in my building and within three days twenty of them were completed and returned. The questionnaire was anonymous so that teachers could answer without inhibition or concern of judgment from me.

After reading through the completed questionnaires I identified and extracted themes from the teachers' responses and created a chart to tally any references to the themes. Some categories had one tally and some had as many as forty-three. Some of the themes on the chart were references to engaging children at home with academic tasks, attending school activities and volunteering in the school, communications, school climate, networking, culture, educational experience and family circumstances. The following paragraphs detail responses and themes that were extracted.

The first question, "What do you think the most important things ESL parents need to know to help their children?" was written to help me understand some of the teachers' views on limited and non-English speaking parents' contributions with their children's academic tasks.

Overwhelmingly in seventeen of the twenty respondents, reading to and with children at home were given as one of the suggestions. Three of the teachers qualified this with reading in the home language as being an acceptable reading activity and a way to help the children academically. Although few in number had considered this as valid reading support, it was recognized and remembered as I had previously given a staff in-service and covered this fact. This demonstrated a support for the validity of academic learning in a child's first language. Five teachers felt that parents

should encourage their children to 'talk' about the school day and share information about classroom work.

One teacher wrote that, "Talking with children about school would help because the child would know that their parent was interested in education" the same teacher wrote, "Expressing the importance of school includes attendance, doing homework, and being involved". Another teacher made the case that it was important for parents to feel connected to the school and that they "should be active and involved". This respondent also stated that, "It was necessary to make sure they (the parents) know that they are welcomed and valued as members of the school community". This participant had noted at some level that in order for a parent to be active and involved they first needed to be welcomed and valued. My thought was that for a person to 'know' they are welcomed and valued, they would need to have many positive experiences that relayed this perception. Unfortunately it was only this one teacher who had made the connection between school climate and family participation, at least when they answered this questionnaire.

Another response to question one came from seven respondents. These teachers stated in various ways that looking in students' backpacks and or take-home folders (for each grade level take-home folders usually go home

each day and contain communications from the teacher or school, and other information like homework assignments and graded classroom work) were important for ESL parents to need to know to help their children in school. For many ESL families, sifting through the often large piles of papers written in English that are in the take-home folders, can prove to be a lengthy task. The challenges include figuring out what is important and what is not and how to understand the explanations of events, assignments, field trips, and any other forms or papers. The students can possibly be conflicted about making sure their parents check what is in their folders or backpacks, especially if there is a test or assignment that has been graded low (not unique to limited English speaking children!). They may also have trouble deciding what they need to explain and/or translate to their parents about field trips or forms that need to be filled out by their parents and returned to the school.

Other responses to question one included three teachers noting that establishing routines at home would be helpful for students to develop good study habits. Two participants stated in similar ways that it was important for parents to be aware of the school calendar and any special days at school that they could participate in. Some of the special days include open houses, party days, performances, field trips, and school lyceums.

Question number two, “What are your basic expectations for ESL parent involvement?” is phrased more specifically about parent participation. It was not my intent or my expectation either way that the answers to the first two questions would vary greatly or have any similarities. What I found was that most of the responses for question one referred to things parents could do at home to help their children, while answers to question two focused on what parents could do at the school. The word ‘involvement’ seemed to translate to in-school involvement. This is noteworthy because there are circumstances (jobs, transportation, childcare, etc...) where parents can not participate in the school, but may be very involved with their children at home.

Twelve of the respondents clearly referenced volunteering in the school. Two qualified their recommendation that “if there wasn’t a conflict with work” the parents could volunteer regularly in the classroom. One teacher wrote, “being able to communicate easily with each other” ( meaning the classroom teacher and parent , the respondent underlined easily) and “come to all school functions”. Both of these comments were interesting and disheartening to me. Without clarifying these statements in any way, it seemed as though both of these conditions were expected without regards to any extenuating circumstances such as transportation, childcare, or for the

parents to be able to speak enough or any English. I could only go on how the response was phrased and then hope that the answer was precipitated quickly and without any negative connotation attached. I thought that the response was revealing an underlying white middle-class assumption of what this teacher thought parents should be able to do.

Ten teachers thought that attending conferences was a basic expectation for parent involvement. I think that almost all the ESL families who have attended the school since I began working there must agree with this as a basic requirement because they almost unanimously do come to the conferences that are held twice a year.

Five of the respondents answered that they expected ESL parents to be involved as much as English speaking parents and one stated “that if they didn’t understand everything, they should ask for help.” This answer may reflect the presumption that like a student, a parent would ask for help and not consider how difficult it could be for an adult to ask another adult for that help. Another teacher also responded similarly, “request special assistance with communication issues. If we know ahead of time that they need help with our communication, we can plan how to best convey info and keep them informed.” I think this participant’s tone is a little more sensitive and seems to have the best interest of the language minority

families in mind. Another teacher did respond that they had the same basic expectations for ESL families as others, but they qualified this with, “translations may be necessary so communications are as clear as possible”. Another teacher replied, “I would like them to feel welcome and comfortable to come in and to ask questions, I want them to be aware of what is being taught so they can do whatever they can to support at home”. Again, this comment suggests that school climate has something to do with a parent’s ability and willingness to be supportive of their child’s academic experiences.

Question three, “What would you like the ESL teachers to do to help improve ESL parent participation?” was crafted so as to inform me of what classroom teachers needed from me to help them improve ESL family participation. Most of the responses were very positive and appreciative and I was glad to know that many valued any efforts that I had done already. One participant commented thoughtfully, “The ESL teachers can help build a comfort level and be in contact with parents regularly” and “help them see how their experiences and culture can enrich us all and encourage them and their children to share with us about their language and culture”. I have found that being an ESL teacher requires advocacy at many levels including being a liaison for bringing information to the families and bringing the families’ information to the rest of the school.

Several teachers responded to this third question by requesting that they needed more information about the students and their academic background. Although teachers have full access to their students' records, I think that these respondents were implying they wanted to understand more about how second language acquisition could be impacting a student's achievement. In my experience I have briefed teachers at the beginning of each school year about the English learners that will be in their classrooms. The request for more information from teachers suggests that I should have continuing conversations throughout the school year about the students whom we share. Because I have a history with many of the students and their families, I am obliged to impart as much input as I could to help the classroom teacher best meet the needs of the students. Briefing at the beginning of a school year does not do enough for any of the parties involved especially for the students.

Continuing comments in reference to question three include one teacher wanting the ESL teachers to translate everything that they sent home. This is certainly an unrealistic request considering the diversity of languages that would need to be translated, but it definitely is something that needs attention for improved communication to happen. For the most effective communication to take place, the school could hire agencies to do

translations for the languages that are served within the district. The other factor that could be considered would be for teachers to minimize the written communications that are sent home and to modify or simplify as many as possible. Another option may be having bilingual staff or available interpreters that can make a personal connection especially for those language minority families who have little or no English.

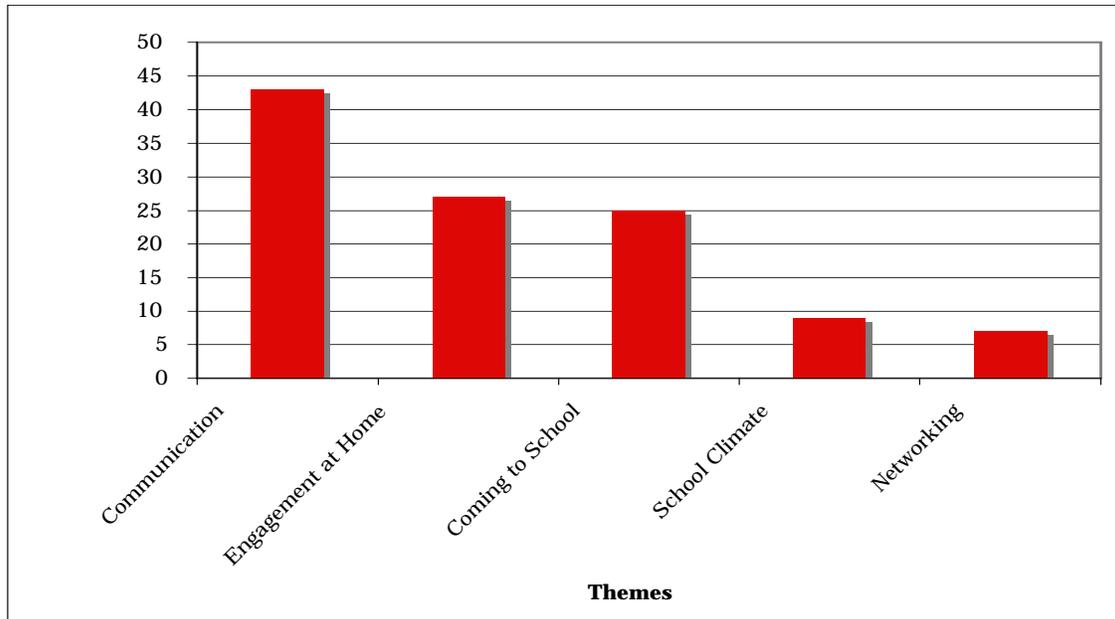
Another teacher thought that “connecting them (ESL parents) with families of the same culture to make them feel more comfortable” was something ESL teachers could do and another referred to “creating a network with other ESL families”. The responses to this question were helpful in knowing what directions I needed to take or continue to take to do my part in creating a school climate that could be more inclusive and acknowledging of ESL families. I also thought it was very insightful for the respondents to consider the idea of networking families.

The fourth and last question, “What do you think the barriers are for ESL parents to participate in more school events?” refers to understanding barriers for ESL parents to participate and be involved with and at the school. The purpose of this question was to find out what teachers thought the barriers were through their experiences and observations. Of the twenty who answered fifteen wrote that language and/or communication were the

greatest barriers for parents to be able to participate more. One teacher did not think there were any barriers at all, which surprised me because they had long lists of ideas for the previous three questions. Five participants made a reference to “making parents feel welcome”, again alluding to school climate.

Four teachers were specific about the understanding of what could be keeping parents from easily participating at the school. One commented, “...different ideas about education, not feeling connected to the school, time and transportation constraints, and child care difficulties”. Another answered, “parents might be afraid or embarrassed if they don’t know enough English, some parents have apologized to me for not speaking English well”. A third responded, “...language, job responsibilities, child care, and cultural differences create the barriers for some families”. These remarks showed me that there were several teachers in my building who had thought more deeply about the issue of participation for ESL families.

Figure 4.1 shows the number of total references of the top five themes extracted from the four questions that were posed to the teachers.



**Figure 4.1** Top Five Themes from the Teacher Questionnaire

Overall, the responses to the four questions were answered with consideration and some basic understanding of some of the challenges language minority parents face when engaging with their child’s school. I realize that I need to work more closely with classroom teachers so that they understand more about their language minority students’ second language acquisition and how that impacts learning in the classroom. I also believe that there are some cultural assumptions and misunderstandings that I could help clarify or explain either individually or in a larger group meeting. I still have a lot of work ahead of me for helping staff work more effectively

with the ESL families and that could be considered an ongoing task for any ESL teacher.

### Student Writing Journal Entries

I work with English language learners in grades two through five and decided that there were 16 students who were in grades three, four, and five who had enough writing skills to express their ideas about their parents' involvement at the school. I wanted to find out how the students felt about their parents coming to the school and I was also interested to find out if any of them included information about their parent's feelings about being in the school setting. The writing prompt given in late April of 2006 was: "Describe the last time that your parent(s) came to school. Explain why they were at school and how you felt about their visit. Give as much detail as you can about your memory."

Journal writing is something that my students do at least once or twice each week. The two-part question was written in order to get as much student writing as possible on the topic. Like the teacher questionnaire, I needed to find themes in the students' writing. With this tool I had only one question to analyze. The students' responses were more diverse than those from the teacher questionnaire, because every student wrote about entirely different experiences than each other.

Two themes emerged from the journal responses: 1) the parent visit made the student happy and 2) the parent visit made the student scared. Two students wrote about being embarrassed, but overall the two themes were that students were either happy or scared.

One fifth grade student wrote about when his mother came to a parent teacher conference, "When my mom was here I felt more normal because I can talk Spanish together. So other people don't understand it is sort of a private chat. Then I feel embarrassed because when you talk people look at you. Sometimes I need to translate or my teachers talks slow to them. That sort of embarrasses me a little. But I still love my mom."

Another student shared that when her parents came to the parent teacher conference, "I feel confidence when my dad and mom came to school. I feel good when my parents came to school because I want them to about me at school. I think it is good for me and also for them."

A fourth grade student whose father came to a music concert reveals that, "When my dad came to school it made me really shy because I knew he would wonder about me in school. I wish my mom came too. She is always goes to work and never come to school and I want her to see me at school sometime."

A third grade student's response describes when her parents came to a Halloween Party at the school, "I felt happy that they went to school with me because I can ask them a question if I need help and I can have fun with them."

Another third grader whose mother came to a school event said, "I felt happy that my mom came to the picnics, but when we got there I felt sad for my mom because my mom doesn't know any people or how to talk to people. She was alone so we stayed not too long."

One other student wrote, "When mom and dad came to conferences I felt happy because I could show them where to go. That was the best day ever to show them my school." Still more comments included, "My mom came to track and for the first time she kept cheering for me and I was happy she was there for me." And, "When my dad came to school I felt happy because I am going to spend time with my dad. I like when he comes to the school to see me there, it's very happy time."

There were some other responses that did not share the enthusiasm of the above comments such as, "In fifth grade I felt embarrassed when my mom came to school. I was afraid that she was there"; "When my mom and dad came to school I felt nervous because I didn't want to see them at the school. I thought that everyone looked at me funny.", "My mom came to school

for confers day and I was very imbresed because I throught that she was going to get mad at me for something and I was a little worrid that I was going to get hit.”, and “when dad came to confrens I was scerd because I was scerd that he wud be mad at me fer not doing good in my scole work. He lookeb mad at me wehn he was ther.” These statements reveal a not-so-positive experience for the students when the parents come to the school.

The comments in the student journal entries disclosed that for most of the students having their family participate in the school was a source of pride and positive self-awareness and for some it brought a feeling of shame and admonishment. Regardless, a parent’s presence caused a student reaction.

### Parent Interviews

Seven parent interviews were conducted with ESL parents between July 15, 2006 and October 15, 2006. From the interviews I hoped to gain insight into how parents feel about interacting with the school and some indication about their role in their children’s education. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and then coded to locate themes. The themes I identified were: communication, student achievement, school climate, respect, inclusiveness, and confusion. Figure 4.2 shows the frequency of these themes referenced in the interviews.

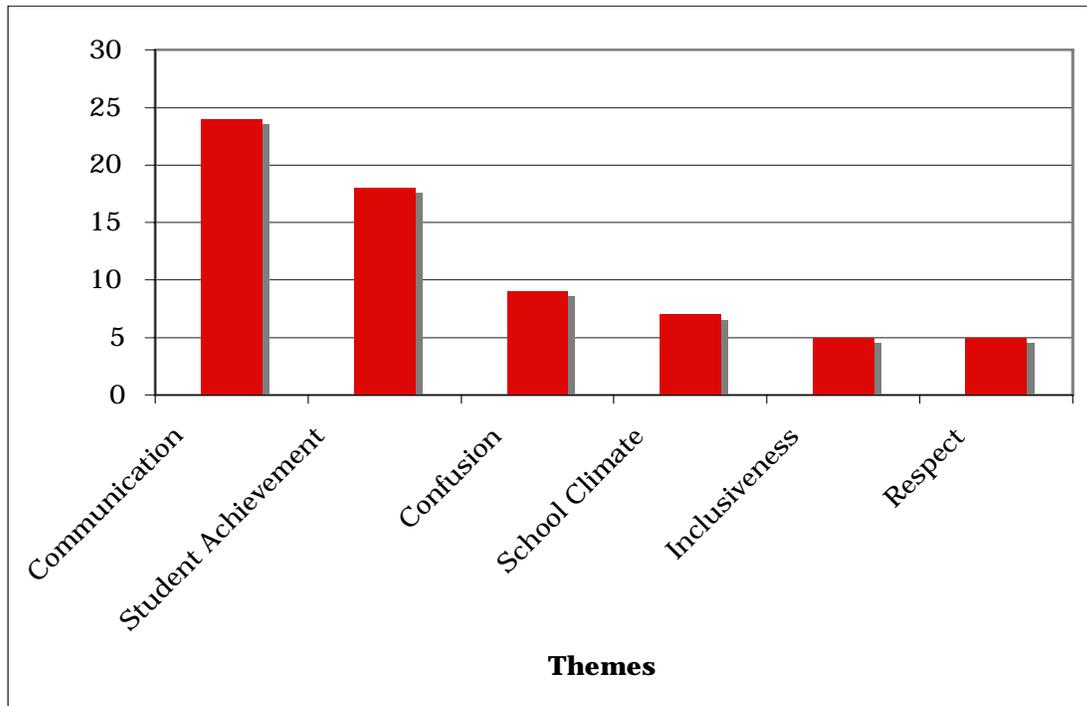


Figure 4.2 Frequency of Six Themes Referenced in Parent Interviews

Communication was clearly the most frequently referred theme in both the teacher questionnaire and the parent interviews.

There were three categories of questions in the interview. Background questions helped to find out about the interviewees personal experiences with schooling. Questions about the children and the school related to experiences their children have had at my school. And finally questions about the parent and the school described the parents' encounters at my school (see Appendix C).

Background Questions

The background questions consisted of eight questions about the participants. Not all of the interview questions will be discussed because some of them were simply informative and did not provide any relevant information for the purposes of this study. Of these eight questions, numbers three through eight gave me information that was helpful in gaining insight on the participants' personal experiences as students in their home countries' schools.

The third background question asked, "Were you able to go to school? If you did, how many years were you in school?" All of my interviewees had been to school in their home countries for at least 8 years and three had gone on to 'higher education,' one to a university and the other two to a trade school in their home country. Question (d) was, "Have you ever attended school in the United States?" One participant went to two years of high school in the United States and had been an ESL student during those years. Question (e) was, "Did you learn English in your home country school?" Two responded that they had learned some basic English, one had taken two years of English in the high school she attended, two had learned English for over three years and in addition had learned some of a third language as well. The other two had never learned any English in their home countries.

Questions (f) and (g) were, “How are schools in the United States different from schools in your country?” and “How are schools in the United States similar to schools in your country?” I was surprised by the response about the differences of all seven interviewees when they all told me that they had a lot more homework when they were children than their children have in the United States and that they had longer school days and years in their home countries. They all thought their children did not have enough homework, which made me wonder if the students were doing all of their homework or if in elementary school we do not really require as much homework as other countries. Another difference was the strictness of the schools that each interviewee attended. One of the parents shared that he had been hit by teachers and another parent described being verbally abused. Two of the interviewees said that they remembered that they had to do a lot of memorizing and that they were given oral tests. One described that oral tests were more common than written tests and that they had to think fast or they would be embarrassed. Other differences included the physical description of the buildings. The school that I work in has open classrooms, walls on three sides and no doors. It is a very modern building and none of the interviewees went to a school like the one their children attend. Two commented that they had initially wondered how the school

worked without having doors for the classrooms. One parent explained that she had learned a lot of sports in school and that students in her country were tested on each sport. This parent thought her child had too much fun in gym class instead of learning how to compete more. Another difference for five of the parents was that they did not eat at the school in their countries, they would go home and eat and then return to school after lunchtime. All of these parents did not ride a school bus to school because the schools were close to their homes so they could walk and two respondents took a city bus to school and back home.

Similarities that were shared included learning to read and write and to learn mathematics. They all learned about their countries' histories, and in high school learned a little bit about the United States. Overall there were many more differences than similarities between their education and that of their children.

Question (h) for this section was, "Did your parents spend any time at your school and if they did what brought them to the school?" The responses to this question were different for all of them. One parent told me that their mother was a teacher and she never had any time to go to her school because the mother had too much work to do for her own students. This interviewee's parents were divorced so their father did not have any

chance to go to the school. This person's mother did go to musical performances that were outside of school, but nothing within the school. Another respondent told me that their mother walked them to school and was friendly with the teacher, but there were never any formal meetings for parents to attend in this person's school. The third interviewee replied that they remembered their parents going to the school sometimes, but could not remember that there were any conferences or meetings. They thought that there were times that families came to the school for celebrations or parties at different times during the year. The fourth person shared that their mother worked and did not go to the school, but she read to them at home and helped them with schoolwork from time to time. The other three did not have much to say about their parents' experiences with their schools. One simply said that their parents were busy with other children and responsibilities at home and the other two just stated that their parents did not go to their schools for any reason.

The responses to this question were telling in the sense that their experience with family involvement within the school walls during their schooling years was very limited or non-existent. This is relevant because in comparison the school district that their own children attended and specifically the school their children were enrolled in had very different

expectations for parents. This difference has implications towards understanding why some parents may not participate often in school activities.

### Questions About the Children and School

The second section of the interview questions asked eight different questions about the participants' children's experiences with the school. As in the previous section, some of the questions in this section are informative and will not be discussed. Others are more relevant to understanding the interviewees' experiences and how they may impact their participation at the school. Some of the questions include, "How many years has your child been attending the school?", "What do you think the school is doing well for your child?", and "What are some things that are difficult for you to understand about the school?" Many of the answers to the questions in this section were very positive about how they perceived their own children's experiences in the school and whether or not they believed that their children were receiving a quality education.

Question (b) states, "Do you think the school is meeting your children's needs? Tell me why or why not." The responses to this question revealed that student achievement was on the minds of the parents as well as on the school. One parent shared that he was happy with all of the help his child

had from the teachers in the school. He had worried that his child was still “behind” in reading and writing and wanted to know if she would catch up with the grade level material. Another parent mentioned her child not doing his homework and getting late slips from time to time. She wanted the teachers to “Be strict with my (her) son so that he will understand that school is serious business.” A third parent expressed that he liked all the things his child was learning, but was concerned that the child had not yet memorized addition and subtraction math facts. He asked “Why don’t I see some math problems come home to practice facts?” A fourth parent also suggested sending reading and math fact practice home for times when his child did not have anything to do. More homework for their children was a common comment again from all of the parents.

One of the questions in this section that did seem to elicit concern was question (f), “What are some things you think the school could do to help you better help your child?” Two of the parents thought that they themselves needed to learn better English in order to help their children and one of these suggested classes for parents in the school to learn English. Another parent was very confused about his child’s math work and wanted to know if it was ok if he taught some of the math concepts in their home language. Other comments about this question included concerns about

their children learning English. The parents wanted to be assured that their children were progressing at school with their English and two participants wanted to make sure it was acceptable to speak the home language at home. One parent explained that she had tried to use English with their child, but did not find it easy. She explained that using English at home was not what she liked doing, but she thought she should so that her child would learn better English. This was not the first time I had heard of a parent trying to help their child this way. In my experience I have had a few parents express their frustration with the children in the family speaking only English to siblings and in response to the parents. I had found it necessary to share with these parents the value of keeping their home language and reassure them that keeping their home language required encouraging their children to use it at home as much as possible. In addition I have had the experience of families being surprised that the 'English teacher' wants the children to continue using another language as well as learning English at school. It seems that some language minority families need to have permission to know that using their first language is a positive at so many levels.

Another question that caused some interesting response in this section was question (f), "What are some things that are difficult for you to understand about the school?" Five of the parents wanted to know what to

do with all the papers that came home with their child. Two did not understand why they needed to sign Reading Log forms and keep track of the time their child spent reading. Three expressed difficulty in knowing what papers to save and two said that they throw a lot of papers away because they are in English and can not read them. Another parent commented that it had been difficult to understand what it meant to be a chaperone for a field trip and was not clear about if the parents had to go on field trips with their child. This parent had opted twice to not send her child to school on the day of a field trip because she could not go with him. Four of the parents stated that they did not know what the testing information that they had received (NCLB notification letters, etc.) was explaining even though they were sent to them in their home language.

Although I was aware that paperwork from school to parent was an issue, speaking with some of the parents during the interview demonstrated how frustrating it was at times for these parents. These parents clearly wanted to be informed, but it was impossible for them to make sense of all the communications that came to them in English.

The responses to these questions were very instructive and showed that work needs to be done to help overcome some of the obstacles of communication and translation that the parents had described. The

significance of communication with comments from both parents and teachers obviously needs to be improved.

### Questions About Parents and the School

The last section of the interview had 13 questions for the parents to answer about themselves and their interaction directly with the school. I hoped to find out how their experiences may have influenced their perception about the school and possibly their ideas about being involved and participating with the school. Again, several of the questions are not discussed due to their informative nature in general and not as having relevance for this project.

The first question was, “Tell me about the first time you came to the school... Do you think it was a positive or negative experience?” Three of the parents stated that they had been overwhelmed when they first came. They thought the office staff was nice, but they did not understand all of the paperwork that was written in English. Two of the parents had been told by the nurse that their children needed more shots before they could come to the school and that had created some confusion for them. One parent had been disappointed that no one had introduced her to her child’s teacher and she and her child had not been shown around the building. Two commented that they did not like the open classrooms at first because it

seemed like they could be too noisy for hearing the teachers. Three of the parents were not happy when they received a long list of school supplies to buy and one did not understand why their children had to share the supplies in kindergarten. The kindergarten classes have each child bring their supplies to school and then all of the supplies are shared in the classroom throughout the school year.

Question (e) and (h) from this section were, “Tell me about your experiences with teachers, have you felt that teachers have informed you about school events and grade level activities?” and, “What are some things that have been difficult for you in regards to interacting with teachers?” For the question e I found that for the most part the participants had been happy with their children’s teachers. They were proud that their children were learning and doing many creative activities in the school. As I went further in my questioning to get more specific information, one parent commented that he did not think that he could ask questions at the conferences because the teacher did all the talking and then the time was up. He wanted more time to ask questions about his child. Because I had attended many conferences I knew that this interviewee had described the situation well. Even though teachers ask parents if they have questions at the very end of the meeting, there is another family within view waiting to

have its turn for a conference. It seems that the conferences are more a time for teachers to show the parents a folder filled with samples of student work in the different curriculum areas than to have a conversation about a child that both parties know. It had been my experience that teachers often use educational jargon that probably is intimidating to ESL parents.

Conferences may not be used as an opportunity to have a conversation about the students and that could create an uncomfortable situation for some language minority parents who want to ask questions or make comments about their child.

Another parent was concerned that her child's teacher had one time called her house and the parent could not understand what the teacher had wanted and had been worried that something was wrong with her child or that her child had done something wrong. The parent had come to the school and found that the teacher was calling about field trip money, but needed the ESL teacher to help them understand the 'problem'. A third parent talked about the school's 'midterm report card' (see Appendix P). This parent was upset to read that there was a 'concern' about some of his child's subjects on a recent midterm report. This was because the idea of a concern in their language meant something very serious was wrong. In this case the concern was in the subject of Reading because the child was

reading below grade level and not reading independently and recording his reading in his Reading Log. On the midterm report a teacher has the choice of checking off 'concerned' or 'not concerned' and making a brief comment on the bottom of the report. The concern may be valid from the standpoint of a grade-level teacher, but without a clear explanation the parent was confused and worried that something serious was wrong with his child.

The most challenging situation that came up with question (h) was described by an interviewee as he explained that his child's teachers seemed to think that the child was 'hyper' and was telling him and his wife to put the child on 'medicine.' They did not want to do that. This parent explained that there had been four teachers at her child's conference the previous spring explaining why they thought the child needed to have medicine (a school psychologist and a special education teacher along with the classroom teacher and an ESL teacher). This parent was very upset to be told this information and was visibly angry about it.

I knew a little bit about the conference the parent had described from the child's ESL teacher sharing the story with me the year earlier. The teacher had told me she had not been briefed or asked her opinion about this child, and had felt that the teachers had been very condescending towards the parents. Shortly after that conference, we (the two ESL teachers

in the building) had a meeting with some members of the special education team to talk about referring English learners for special education services and about consulting the ESL teachers whenever concerns about one of our students came up. We thought it was important to be part of whatever team was talking about an ESL student, and that we should have a conversation about cultural differences in regards to communicating concerns to parents. When interviewing this parent I refrained from making any reference to knowing about this meeting and only assured them that I could understand how they felt in that situation.

Question (i) was, “What are some things that have been comfortable for you in regards to interacting with teachers?” Two parents referred to coming to the school to help with classroom parties. One helped get food together with other classroom parents and the other parent had helped with a game in her child’s classroom. Another parent had been on a field trip with his child’s class and had enjoyed that time especially meeting some of his child’s friends. Five of these parents had come to the family day and each one included that they had enjoyed meeting the teachers who were at that event. One parent came to the school to help with a first grade project and was happy to have been invited to help her child in the classroom.

Question (k) was, “What resources would you like to have available at the school so that you can help your child?” Three of the participants quickly responded with needing information to be translated into their language. One reiterated (from a previous question) that she did not know which papers her children brought from school were important much of the time. The other parent simply suggested that he would like to be able to understand more and he did not have any one in his family who was able to help him understand the written communications from the school. Another parent wanted to know if the school library had any books in her language or if there could be some available to parents. A fourth parent wanted to help in her child’s classroom and needed transportation to get to the school to be able to do so. The fifth parent asked if he could get some training to help their child, this parent had previously responded to another question that having classes for parents in the school would be helpful. Each of these suggestions is reasonable and practical, yet so far have not been considered by the school district.

Question (l) and (m) were, “Do you feel as though the school is aware of your culture?” and “How do you know that the school is or is not aware of your culture?” Only three of the seven parents thought that there was some awareness of other cultures in the school. One had helped with one of the

cultural displays and thought that it was good that the school recognized the importance of sharing cultures in some way. A second parent noticed that there were some books in the school library that had some multicultural themes to them and the third parent knew that the music teacher taught songs that were in Spanish to her children. One of the four who did not think that the school was aware of his culture remarked that, "It wasn't important to him because he wanted his children to learn about America." Of the other three, one stated that there was not anything in the school that reminded her of her culture, and she suggested having a Cinco de Mayo celebration and that she would be willing to help organize it.

The school building in itself is a very pleasant building, but it is true that very little visually had been done to demonstrate a welcoming, multicultural environment. As evidenced by parent responses, for some this may be unimportant, but for others it may be necessary to be able to visually make a cultural connection in order to know that they are welcomed.

Both during the interviews and after when I was analyzing the interviews I realized that some of these parents had felt patronized by teachers or other school staff, and I wondered how many native-speaking, dominant culture parents had been similarly treated. The interviews were an excellent tool in getting information from the parents. I think that after

the first few questions, when they realized that we were going to have a conversation the participants became relaxed and open to the process. The two interviews that had the interpreter present were a little different from those that did not as far as the comfort level. In these interviews, the parents' answers were shorter in length and there was not as much elaborating or story telling in their answers. There was less laughing or getting off of the topic and the situation just seemed a little more formal.

### Summary

The three data collecting tools that I used for my research gave me a wealth of valuable information to assist me in understanding the complexities of improving ESL family participation in the school environment. The teacher questionnaire allowed me to examine what teachers believed was important for parents to do to help their children with school, how teachers perceived parent involvement of language minority families, what the ESL teachers could do to help in improving parent participation, and what they thought were barriers for ESL parents to be more involved with school activities. The student journaling gave me important insights into how English learners feel about their families interacting within the school domain. The students' unique perspective on their joys and fears of having their parents come to the school allowed me to

get a glimpse of their thoughts and vulnerabilities on the topic of their families. And finally, the parent interviews contributed towards what I really needed to comprehend to make this research meaningful. The voices of these parents reflected their frustrations, concerns, struggles, self-respect, and perseverance that I will never forget. The admiration that I had of these families before the interviews increased a hundred-fold as I came to know more about them and their desire to want the best for their children. With this knowledge I have a clearer vision of my role as an agent of change in being a teacher of English learners and an advocate for the empowerment of their families.

In the final chapter of this capstone, the conclusion, I will share my thoughts on how I will use the data that I have collected and analyzed to pursue the changes that can be implemented to improve ESL family involvement in my school.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In chapter three I described the three data collection procedures that I used for this study. The three methodologies I used were 1) a teacher questionnaire, 2) student writing journal entries, and 3) parent interviews. Each procedure was useful in understanding some of the issues that could help guide me to answering my research question, why are many of the ESL families in my school not participating in school activities? This chapter presents the results of the methodologies used for this research. In studying my results I am hopeful of positively impacting and improving ESL family involvement in the school that I work.

In the section of student journal entries, the misspellings are those of the students. This is done to maintain the authenticity of each student's writing.

### Teacher Questionnaire

The teacher questionnaire consisted of the following 4 open-ended questions that were designed to help me understand classroom teacher expectations for ESL families:

- 1) What do you think the most important things ESL parents need to know to help their children in school?
- 2) What are your basic expectations for ESL parent involvement?
- 3) What would you like the ESL teachers to do to help improve ESL parent participation?
- 4) What do you think the barriers are for ESL parents to participate in more school events?

This questionnaire was given in June 2006 to the twenty-six kindergarten through fifth grade classroom teachers in my building and within three days twenty of them were completed and returned. The questionnaire was anonymous so that teachers could answer without inhibition or concern of judgment from me.

After reading through the completed questionnaires I identified and extracted themes from the teachers' responses and created a chart to tally any references to the themes. Some categories had one tally and some had as many as forty-three. Some of the themes on the chart were references to engaging children at home with academic tasks, attending school activities

and volunteering in the school, communications, school climate, networking. culture, educational experience and family circumstances. The following paragraphs detail responses and themes that were extracted.

The first question, “What do you think the most important things ESL parents need to know to help their children?” was written to help me understand some of the teachers’ views on limited and non-English speaking parents’ contributions with their children’s academic tasks.

Overwhelmingly in seventeen of the twenty respondents, reading to and with children at home were given as one of the suggestions. Three of the teachers qualified this with reading in the home language as being an acceptable reading activity and a way to help the children academically. Although few in number had considered this as valid reading support, it was recognized and remembered as I had previously given a staff in-service and covered this fact. This demonstrated a support for the validity of academic learning in a child’s first language. Five teachers felt that parents should encourage their children to ‘talk’ about the school day and share information about classroom work.

One teacher wrote that, “Talking with children about school would help because the child would know that their parent was interested in education” the same teacher wrote, “Expressing the importance of school includes

attendance, doing homework, and being involved”. Another teacher made the case that it was important for parents to feel connected to the school and that they “should be active and involved”. This respondent also stated that, “It was necessary to make sure they (the parents) know that they are welcomed and valued as members of the school community”. This participant had noted at some level that in order for a parent to be active and involved they first needed to be welcomed and valued. My thought was that for a person to ‘know’ they are welcomed and valued, they would need to have many positive experiences that relayed this perception. Unfortunately it was only this one teacher who had made the connection between school climate and family participation, at least when they answered this questionnaire.

Another response to question one came from seven respondents. These teachers stated in various ways that looking in students’ backpacks and or take-home folders (for each grade level take-home folders usually go home each day and contain communications from the teacher or school, and other information like homework assignments and graded classroom work) were important for ESL parents to need to know to help their children in school. For many ESL families, sifting through the often large piles of papers written in English that are in the take-home folders, can prove to be a lengthy task.

The challenges include figuring out what is important and what is not and how to understand the explanations of events, assignments, field trips, and any other forms or papers. The students can possibly be conflicted about making sure their parents check what is in their folders or backpacks, especially if there is a test or assignment that has been graded low (not unique to limited English speaking children!). They may also have trouble deciding what they need to explain and/or translate to their parents about field trips or forms that need to be filled out by their parents and returned to the school.

Other responses to question one included three teachers noting that establishing routines at home would be helpful for students to develop good study habits. Two participants stated in similar ways that it was important for parents to be aware of the school calendar and any special days at school that they could participate in. Some of the special days include open houses, party days, performances, field trips, and school lyceums.

Question number two, “What are your basic expectations for ESL parent involvement?” is phrased more specifically about parent participation. It was not my intent or my expectation either way that the answers to the first two questions would vary greatly or have any similarities. What I found was that most of the responses for question one referred to things parents

could do at home to help their children, while answers to question two focused on what parents could do at the school. The word 'involvement' seemed to translate to in-school involvement. This is noteworthy because there are circumstances (jobs, transportation, childcare, etc...) where parents can not participate in the school, but may be very involved with their children at home.

Twelve of the respondents clearly referenced volunteering in the school. Two qualified their recommendation that "if there wasn't a conflict with work" the parents could volunteer regularly in the classroom. One teacher wrote, "being able to communicate easily with each other" ( meaning the classroom teacher and parent , the respondent underlined easily) and "come to all school functions". Both of these comments were interesting and disheartening to me. Without clarifying these statements in any way, it seemed as though both of these conditions were expected without regards to any extenuating circumstances such as transportation, childcare, or for the parents to be able to speak enough or any English. I could only go on how the response was phrased and then hope that the answer was precipitated quickly and without any negative connotation attached. I thought that the response was revealing an underlying white middle-class assumption of what this teacher thought parents should be able to do.

Ten teachers thought that attending conferences was a basic expectation for parent involvement. I think that almost all the ESL families who have attended the school since I began working there must agree with this as a basic requirement because they almost unanimously do come to the conferences that are held twice a year.

Five of the respondents answered that they expected ESL parents to be involved as much as English speaking parents and one stated “that if they didn’t understand everything, they should ask for help.” This answer may reflect the presumption that like a student, a parent would ask for help and not consider how difficult it could be for an adult to ask another adult for that help. Another teacher also responded similarly, “request special assistance with communication issues. If we know ahead of time that they need help with our communication, we can plan how to best convey info and keep them informed.” I think this participant’s tone is a little more sensitive and seems to have the best interest of the language minority families in mind. Another teacher did respond that they had the same basic expectations for ESL families as others, but they qualified this with, “translations may be necessary so communications are as clear as possible”. Another teacher replied, “I would like them to feel welcome and comfortable to come in and to ask questions, I want them to be aware of what is being

taught so they can do whatever they can to support at home”. Again, this comment suggests that school climate has something to do with a parent’s ability and willingness to be supportive of their child’s academic experiences.

Question three, “What would you like the ESL teachers to do to help improve ESL parent participation?” was crafted so as to inform me of what classroom teachers needed from me to help them improve ESL family participation. Most of the responses were very positive and appreciative and I was glad to know that many valued any efforts that I had done already. One participant commented thoughtfully, “The ESL teachers can help build a comfort level and be in contact with parents regularly” and “help them see how their experiences and culture can enrich us all and encourage them and their children to share with us about their language and culture”. I have found that being an ESL teacher requires advocacy at many levels including being a liaison for bringing information to the families and bringing the families’ information to the rest of the school.

Several teachers responded to this third question by requesting that they needed more information about the students and their academic background. Although teachers have full access to their students’ records, I think that these respondents were implying they wanted to understand more about how second language acquisition could be impacting a student’s

achievement. In my experience I have briefed teachers at the beginning of each school year about the English learners that will be in their classrooms. The request for more information from teachers suggests that I should have continuing conversations throughout the school year about the students whom we share. Because I have a history with many of the students and their families, I am obliged to impart as much input as I could to help the classroom teacher best meet the needs of the students. Briefing at the beginning of a school year does not do enough for any of the parties involved especially for the students.

Continuing comments in reference to question three include one teacher wanting the ESL teachers to translate everything that they sent home. This is certainly an unrealistic request considering the diversity of languages that would need to be translated, but it definitely is something that needs attention for improved communication to happen. For the most effective communication to take place, the school could hire agencies to do translations for the languages that are served within the district. The other factor that could be considered would be for teachers to minimize the written communications that are sent home and to modify or simplify as many as possible. Another option may be having bilingual staff or available

interpreters that can make a personal connection especially for those language minority families who have little or no English.

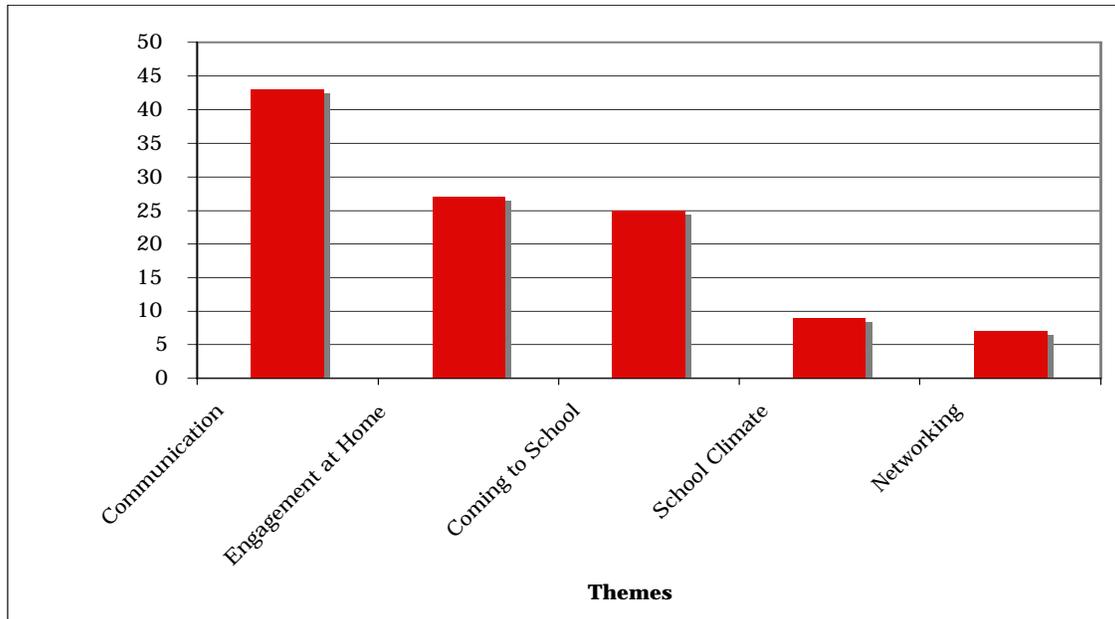
Another teacher thought that “connecting them (ESL parents) with families of the same culture to make them feel more comfortable” was something ESL teachers could do and another referred to “creating a network with other ESL families”. The responses to this question were helpful in knowing what directions I needed to take or continue to take to do my part in creating a school climate that could be more inclusive and acknowledging of ESL families. I also thought it was very insightful for the respondents to consider the idea of networking families.

The fourth and last question, “What do you think the barriers are for ESL parents to participate in more school events?” refers to understanding barriers for ESL parents to participate and be involved with and at the school. The purpose of this question was to find out what teachers thought the barriers were through their experiences and observations. Of the twenty who answered fifteen wrote that language and/or communication were the greatest barriers for parents to be able to participate more. One teacher did not think there were any barriers at all, which surprised me because they had long lists of ideas for the previous three questions. Five participants

made a reference to “making parents feel welcome”, again alluding to school climate.

Four teachers were specific about the understanding of what could be keeping parents from easily participating at the school. One commented, “...different ideas about education, not feeling connected to the school, time and transportation constraints, and child care difficulties”. Another answered, “parents might be afraid or embarrassed if they don’t know enough English, some parents have apologized to me for not speaking English well”. A third responded, “...language, job responsibilities, child care, and cultural differences create the barriers for some families”. These remarks showed me that there were several teachers in my building who had thought more deeply about the issue of participation for ESL families.

Figure 4.1 shows the number of total references of the top five themes extracted from the four questions that were posed to the teachers.



**Figure 4.1** Top Five Themes from the Teacher Questionnaire

Overall, the responses to the four questions were answered with consideration and some basic understanding of some of the challenges language minority parents face when engaging with their child’s school. I realize that I need to work more closely with classroom teachers so that they understand more about their language minority students’ second language acquisition and how that impacts learning in the classroom. I also believe that there are some cultural assumptions and misunderstandings that I could help clarify or explain either individually or in a larger group meeting. I still have a lot of work ahead of me for helping staff work more effectively

with the ESL families and that could be considered an ongoing task for any ESL teacher.

### Student Writing Journal Entries

I work with English language learners in grades two through five and decided that there were 16 students who were in grades three, four, and five who had enough writing skills to express their ideas about their parents' involvement at the school. I wanted to find out how the students felt about their parents coming to the school and I was also interested to find out if any of them included information about their parent's feelings about being in the school setting. The writing prompt given in late April of 2006 was: "Describe the last time that your parent(s) came to school. Explain why they were at school and how you felt about their visit. Give as much detail as you can about your memory."

Journal writing is something that my students do at least once or twice each week. The two-part question was written in order to get as much student writing as possible on the topic. Like the teacher questionnaire, I needed to find themes in the students' writing. With this tool I had only one question to analyze. The students' responses were more diverse than those from the teacher questionnaire, because every student wrote about entirely different experiences than each other.

Two themes emerged from the journal responses: 1) the parent visit made the student happy and 2) the parent visit made the student scared. Two students wrote about being embarrassed, but overall the two themes were that students were either happy or scared.

One fifth grade student wrote about when his mother came to a parent teacher conference, "When my mom was here I felt more normal because I can talk Spanish together. So other people don't understand it is sort of a private chat. Then I feel embarrassed because when you talk people look at you. Sometimes I need to translate or my teachers talks slow to them. That sort of embarrasses me a little. But I still love my mom."

Another student shared that when her parents came to the parent teacher conference, "I feel confidence when my dad and mom came to school. I feel good when my parents came to school because I want them to about me at school. I think it is good for me and also for them."

A fourth grade student whose father came to a music concert reveals that, "When my dad came to school it made me really shy because I knew he would wonder about me in school. I wish my mom came too. She is always goes to work and never come to school and I want her to see me at school sometime."

A third grade student's response describes when her parents came to a Halloween Party at the school, "I felt happy that they went to school with me because I can ask them a question if I need help and I can have fun with them."

Another third grader whose mother came to a school event said, "I felt happy that my mom came to the picnics, but when we got there I felt sad for my mom because my mom doesn't know any people or how to talk to people. She was alone so we stayed not too long."

One other student wrote, "When mom and dad came to conferences I felt happy because I could show them where to go. That was the best day ever to show them my school." Still more comments included, "My mom came to track and for the first time she kept cheering for me and I was happy she was there for me." And, "When my dad came to school I felt happy because I am going to spend time with my dad. I like when he comes to the school to see me there, it's very happy time."

There were some other responses that did not share the enthusiasm of the above comments such as, "In fifth grade I felt embarrassed when my mom came to school. I was afraid that she was there"; "When my mom and dad came to school I felt nervous because I didn't want to see them at the school. I thought that everyone looked at me funny.", "My mom came to school

for confers day and I was very imbresed because I throught that she was going to get mad at me for something and I was a little worrid that I was going to get hit.”, and “when dad came to confrens I was scerd because I was scerd that he wud be mad at me fer not doing good in my scole work. He lookeb mad at me wehn he was ther.” These statements reveal a not-so-positive experience for the students when the parents come to the school.

The comments in the student journal entries disclosed that for most of the students having their family participate in the school was a source of pride and positive self-awareness and for some it brought a feeling of shame and admonishment. Regardless, a parent’s presence caused a student reaction.

### Parent Interviews

Seven parent interviews were conducted with ESL parents between July 15, 2006 and October 15, 2006. From the interviews I hoped to gain insight into how parents feel about interacting with the school and some indication about their role in their children’s education. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and then coded to locate themes. The themes I identified were: communication, student achievement, school climate, respect, inclusiveness, and confusion. Figure 4.2 shows the frequency of these themes referenced in the interviews.

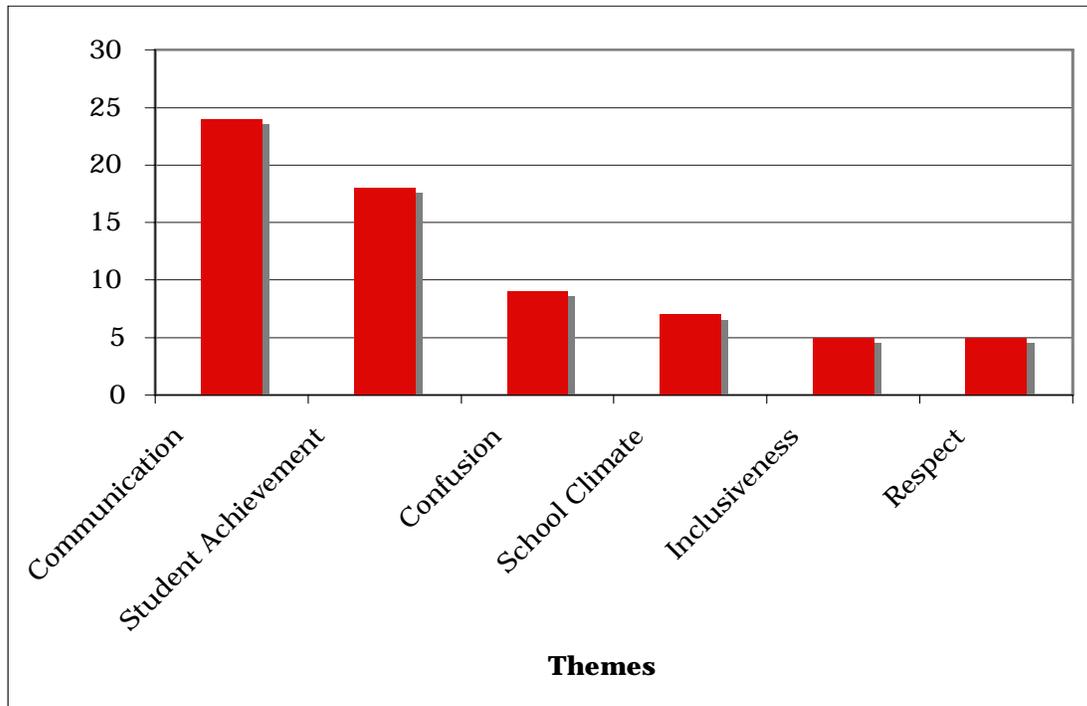


Figure 4.2 Frequency of Six Themes Referenced in Parent Interviews

Communication was clearly the most frequently referred theme in both the teacher questionnaire and the parent interviews.

There were three categories of questions in the interview. Background questions helped to find out about the interviewees personal experiences with schooling. Questions about the children and the school related to experiences their children have had at my school. And finally questions about the parent and the school described the parents' encounters at my school (see Appendix C).

#### Background Questions

The background questions consisted of eight questions about the participants. Not all of the interview questions will be discussed because some of them were simply informative and did not provide any relevant information for the purposes of this study. Of these eight questions, numbers three through eight gave me information that was helpful in gaining insight on the participants' personal experiences as students in their home countries' schools.

The third background question asked, "Were you able to go to school? If you did, how many years were you in school?" All of my interviewees had been to school in their home countries for at least 8 years and three had gone on to 'higher education,' one to a university and the other two to a trade school in their home country. Question (d) was, "Have you ever attended school in the United States?" One participant went to two years of high school in the United States and had been an ESL student during those years. Question (e) was, "Did you learn English in your home country school?" Two responded that they had learned some basic English, one had taken two years of English in the high school she attended, two had learned English for over three years and in addition had learned some of a third language as well. The other two had never learned any English in their home countries.

Questions (f) and (g) were, “How are schools in the United States different from schools in your country?” and “How are schools in the United States similar to schools in your country?” I was surprised by the response about the differences of all seven interviewees when they all told me that they had a lot more homework when they were children than their children have in the United States and that they had longer school days and years in their home countries. They all thought their children did not have enough homework, which made me wonder if the students were doing all of their homework or if in elementary school we do not really require as much homework as other countries. Another difference was the strictness of the schools that each interviewee attended. One of the parents shared that he had been hit by teachers and another parent described being verbally abused. Two of the interviewees said that they remembered that they had to do a lot of memorizing and that they were given oral tests. One described that oral tests were more common than written tests and that they had to think fast or they would be embarrassed. Other differences included the physical description of the buildings. The school that I work in has open classrooms, walls on three sides and no doors. It is a very modern building and none of the interviewees went to a school like the one their children attend. Two commented that they had initially wondered how the school

worked without having doors for the classrooms. One parent explained that she had learned a lot of sports in school and that students in her country were tested on each sport. This parent thought her child had too much fun in gym class instead of learning how to compete more. Another difference for five of the parents was that they did not eat at the school in their countries, they would go home and eat and then return to school after lunchtime. All of these parents did not ride a school bus to school because the schools were close to their homes so they could walk and two respondents took a city bus to school and back home.

Similarities that were shared included learning to read and write and to learn mathematics. They all learned about their countries' histories, and in high school learned a little bit about the United States. Overall there were many more differences than similarities between their education and that of their children.

Question (h) for this section was, "Did your parents spend any time at your school and if they did what brought them to the school?" The responses to this question were different for all of them. One parent told me that their mother was a teacher and she never had any time to go to her school because the mother had too much work to do for her own students. This interviewee's parents were divorced so their father did not have any

chance to go to the school. This person's mother did go to musical performances that were outside of school, but nothing within the school. Another respondent told me that their mother walked them to school and was friendly with the teacher, but there were never any formal meetings for parents to attend in this person's school. The third interviewee replied that they remembered their parents going to the school sometimes, but could not remember that there were any conferences or meetings. They thought that there were times that families came to the school for celebrations or parties at different times during the year. The fourth person shared that their mother worked and did not go to the school, but she read to them at home and helped them with schoolwork from time to time. The other three did not have much to say about their parents' experiences with their schools. One simply said that their parents were busy with other children and responsibilities at home and the other two just stated that their parents did not go to their schools for any reason.

The responses to this question were telling in the sense that their experience with family involvement within the school walls during their schooling years was very limited or non-existent. This is relevant because in comparison the school district that their own children attended and specifically the school their children were enrolled in had very different

expectations for parents. This difference has implications towards understanding why some parents may not participate often in school activities.

### Questions About the Children and School

The second section of the interview questions asked eight different questions about the participants' children's experiences with the school. As in the previous section, some of the questions in this section are informative and will not be discussed. Others are more relevant to understanding the interviewees' experiences and how they may impact their participation at the school. Some of the questions include, "How many years has your child been attending the school?", "What do you think the school is doing well for your child?", and "What are some things that are difficult for you to understand about the school?" Many of the answers to the questions in this section were very positive about how they perceived their own children's experiences in the school and whether or not they believed that their children were receiving a quality education.

Question (b) states, "Do you think the school is meeting your children's needs? Tell me why or why not." The responses to this question revealed that student achievement was on the minds of the parents as well as on the school. One parent shared that he was happy with all of the help his child

had from the teachers in the school. He had worried that his child was still “behind” in reading and writing and wanted to know if she would catch up with the grade level material. Another parent mentioned her child not doing his homework and getting late slips from time to time. She wanted the teachers to “Be strict with my (her) son so that he will understand that school is serious business.” A third parent expressed that he liked all the things his child was learning, but was concerned that the child had not yet memorized addition and subtraction math facts. He asked “Why don’t I see some math problems come home to practice facts?” A fourth parent also suggested sending reading and math fact practice home for times when his child did not have anything to do. More homework for their children was a common comment again from all of the parents.

One of the questions in this section that did seem to elicit concern was question (f), “What are some things you think the school could do to help you better help your child?” Two of the parents thought that they themselves needed to learn better English in order to help their children and one of these suggested classes for parents in the school to learn English. Another parent was very confused about his child’s math work and wanted to know if it was ok if he taught some of the math concepts in their home language. Other comments about this question included concerns about

their children learning English. The parents wanted to be assured that their children were progressing at school with their English and two participants wanted to make sure it was acceptable to speak the home language at home. One parent explained that she had tried to use English with their child, but did not find it easy. She explained that using English at home was not what she liked doing, but she thought she should so that her child would learn better English. This was not the first time I had heard of a parent trying to help their child this way. In my experience I have had a few parents express their frustration with the children in the family speaking only English to siblings and in response to the parents. I had found it necessary to share with these parents the value of keeping their home language and reassure them that keeping their home language required encouraging their children to use it at home as much as possible. In addition I have had the experience of families being surprised that the 'English teacher' wants the children to continue using another language as well as learning English at school. It seems that some language minority families need to have permission to know that using their first language is a positive at so many levels.

Another question that caused some interesting response in this section was question (f), "What are some things that are difficult for you to understand about the school?" Five of the parents wanted to know what to

do with all the papers that came home with their child. Two did not understand why they needed to sign Reading Log forms and keep track of the time their child spent reading. Three expressed difficulty in knowing what papers to save and two said that they throw a lot of papers away because they are in English and can not read them. Another parent commented that it had been difficult to understand what it meant to be a chaperone for a field trip and was not clear about if the parents had to go on field trips with their child. This parent had opted twice to not send her child to school on the day of a field trip because she could not go with him. Four of the parents stated that they did not know what the testing information that they had received (NCLB notification letters, etc.) was explaining even though they were sent to them in their home language.

Although I was aware that paperwork from school to parent was an issue, speaking with some of the parents during the interview demonstrated how frustrating it was at times for these parents. These parents clearly wanted to be informed, but it was impossible for them to make sense of all the communications that came to them in English.

The responses to these questions were very instructive and showed that work needs to be done to help overcome some of the obstacles of communication and translation that the parents had described. The

significance of communication with comments from both parents and teachers obviously needs to be improved.

### Questions About Parents and the School

The last section of the interview had 13 questions for the parents to answer about themselves and their interaction directly with the school. I hoped to find out how their experiences may have influenced their perception about the school and possibly their ideas about being involved and participating with the school. Again, several of the questions are not discussed due to their informative nature in general and not as having relevance for this project.

The first question was, "Tell me about the first time you came to the school... Do you think it was a positive or negative experience?" Three of the parents stated that they had been overwhelmed when they first came. They thought the office staff was nice, but they did not understand all of the paperwork that was written in English. Two of the parents had been told by the nurse that their children needed more shots before they could come to the school and that had created some confusion for them. One parent had been disappointed that no one had introduced her to her child's teacher and she and her child had not been shown around the building. Two commented that they did not like the open classrooms at first because it

seemed like they could be too noisy for hearing the teachers. Three of the parents were not happy when they received a long list of school supplies to buy and one did not understand why their children had to share the supplies in kindergarten. The kindergarten classes have each child bring their supplies to school and then all of the supplies are shared in the classroom throughout the school year.

Question (e) and (h) from this section were, “Tell me about your experiences with teachers, have you felt that teachers have informed you about school events and grade level activities?” and, “What are some things that have been difficult for you in regards to interacting with teachers?” For the question e I found that for the most part the participants had been happy with their children’s teachers. They were proud that their children were learning and doing many creative activities in the school. As I went further in my questioning to get more specific information, one parent commented that he did not think that he could ask questions at the conferences because the teacher did all the talking and then the time was up. He wanted more time to ask questions about his child. Because I had attended many conferences I knew that this interviewee had described the situation well. Even though teachers ask parents if they have questions at the very end of the meeting, there is another family within view waiting to

have its turn for a conference. It seems that the conferences are more a time for teachers to show the parents a folder filled with samples of student work in the different curriculum areas than to have a conversation about a child that both parties know. It had been my experience that teachers often use educational jargon that probably is intimidating to ESL parents.

Conferences may not be used as an opportunity to have a conversation about the students and that could create an uncomfortable situation for some language minority parents who want to ask questions or make comments about their child.

Another parent was concerned that her child's teacher had one time called her house and the parent could not understand what the teacher had wanted and had been worried that something was wrong with her child or that her child had done something wrong. The parent had come to the school and found that the teacher was calling about field trip money, but needed the ESL teacher to help them understand the 'problem'. A third parent talked about the school's 'midterm report card' (see Appendix P). This parent was upset to read that there was a 'concern' about some of his child's subjects on a recent midterm report. This was because the idea of a concern in their language meant something very serious was wrong. In this case the concern was in the subject of Reading because the child was

reading below grade level and not reading independently and recording his reading in his Reading Log. On the midterm report a teacher has the choice of checking off 'concerned' or 'not concerned' and making a brief comment on the bottom of the report. The concern may be valid from the standpoint of a grade-level teacher, but without a clear explanation the parent was confused and worried that something serious was wrong with his child.

The most challenging situation that came up with question (h) was described by an interviewee as he explained that his child's teachers seemed to think that the child was 'hyper' and was telling him and his wife to put the child on 'medicine.' They did not want to do that. This parent explained that there had been four teachers at her child's conference the previous spring explaining why they thought the child needed to have medicine (a school psychologist and a special education teacher along with the classroom teacher and an ESL teacher). This parent was very upset to be told this information and was visibly angry about it.

I knew a little bit about the conference the parent had described from the child's ESL teacher sharing the story with me the year earlier. The teacher had told me she had not been briefed or asked her opinion about this child, and had felt that the teachers had been very condescending towards the parents. Shortly after that conference, we (the two ESL teachers

in the building) had a meeting with some members of the special education team to talk about referring English learners for special education services and about consulting the ESL teachers whenever concerns about one of our students came up. We thought it was important to be part of whatever team was talking about an ESL student, and that we should have a conversation about cultural differences in regards to communicating concerns to parents. When interviewing this parent I refrained from making any reference to knowing about this meeting and only assured them that I could understand how they felt in that situation.

Question (i) was, “What are some things that have been comfortable for you in regards to interacting with teachers?” Two parents referred to coming to the school to help with classroom parties. One helped get food together with other classroom parents and the other parent had helped with a game in her child’s classroom. Another parent had been on a field trip with his child’s class and had enjoyed that time especially meeting some of his child’s friends. Five of these parents had come to the family day and each one included that they had enjoyed meeting the teachers who were at that event. One parent came to the school to help with a first grade project and was happy to have been invited to help her child in the classroom.

Question (k) was, “What resources would you like to have available at the school so that you can help your child?” Three of the participants quickly responded with needing information to be translated into their language. One reiterated (from a previous question) that she did not know which papers her children brought from school were important much of the time. The other parent simply suggested that he would like to be able to understand more and he did not have any one in his family who was able to help him understand the written communications from the school. Another parent wanted to know if the school library had any books in her language or if there could be some available to parents. A fourth parent wanted to help in her child’s classroom and needed transportation to get to the school to be able to do so. The fifth parent asked if he could get some training to help their child, this parent had previously responded to another question that having classes for parents in the school would be helpful. Each of these suggestions is reasonable and practical, yet so far have not been considered by the school district.

Question (l) and (m) were, “Do you feel as though the school is aware of your culture?” and “How do you know that the school is or is not aware of your culture?” Only three of the seven parents thought that there was some awareness of other cultures in the school. One had helped with one of the

cultural displays and thought that it was good that the school recognized the importance of sharing cultures in some way. A second parent noticed that there were some books in the school library that had some multicultural themes to them and the third parent knew that the music teacher taught songs that were in Spanish to her children. One of the four who did not think that the school was aware of his culture remarked that, "It wasn't important to him because he wanted his children to learn about America." Of the other three, one stated that there was not anything in the school that reminded her of her culture, and she suggested having a Cinco de Mayo celebration and that she would be willing to help organize it.

The school building in itself is a very pleasant building, but it is true that very little visually had been done to demonstrate a welcoming, multicultural environment. As evidenced by parent responses, for some this may be unimportant, but for others it may be necessary to be able to visually make a cultural connection in order to know that they are welcomed.

Both during the interviews and after when I was analyzing the interviews I realized that some of these parents had felt patronized by teachers or other school staff, and I wondered how many native-speaking, dominant culture parents had been similarly treated. The interviews were an excellent tool in getting information from the parents. I think that after

the first few questions, when they realized that we were going to have a conversation the participants became relaxed and open to the process. The two interviews that had the interpreter present were a little different from those that did not as far as the comfort level. In these interviews, the parents' answers were shorter in length and there was not as much elaborating or story telling in their answers. There was less laughing or getting off of the topic and the situation just seemed a little more formal.

### Summary

The three data collecting tools that I used for my research gave me a wealth of valuable information to assist me in understanding the complexities of improving ESL family participation in the school environment. The teacher questionnaire allowed me to examine what teachers believed was important for parents to do to help their children with school, how teachers perceived parent involvement of language minority families, what the ESL teachers could do to help in improving parent participation, and what they thought were barriers for ESL parents to be more involved with school activities. The student journaling gave me important insights into how English learners feel about their families interacting within the school domain. The students' unique perspective on their joys and fears of having their parents come to the school allowed me to

get a glimpse of their thoughts and vulnerabilities on the topic of their families. And finally, the parent interviews contributed towards what I really needed to comprehend to make this research meaningful. The voices of these parents reflected their frustrations, concerns, struggles, self-respect, and perseverance that I will never forget. The admiration that I had of these families before the interviews increased a hundred-fold as I came to know more about them and their desire to want the best for their children. With this knowledge I have a clearer vision of my role as an agent of change in being a teacher of English learners and an advocate for the empowerment of their families.

In the final chapter of this capstone, the conclusion, I will share my thoughts on how I will use the data that I have collected and analyzed to pursue the changes that can be implemented to improve ESL family involvement in my school.

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