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Engaging Mexican and Mexican-American Mothers in Schools: Using Culture, Acculturation, and the Situational Theory of Publics to Motivate Parental Involvement

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ENGAGING MEXICAN AND MEXICAN-AMERICAN MOTHERS IN SCHOOLS: USING CULTURE, ACCULTURATION, AND THE SITUATIONAL THEORY OF PUBLICS TO MOTIVATE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

by

LINDA C PÉREZ

Under the Direction of Natalie T. J. Tindall, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Hispanic parents face several barriers that impede their involvement in their children's education. This lack of parental involvement negatively affects the academic outcome of students, graduation rates, and college attendance. This study uses the situational theory of publics to determine what kind of public Mexican parents are, and makes recommendations on what is the best way to engage them and motivate them to participate in schools. Seventeen Mexican mothers were interviewed about their views on education and relationships with their children's teachers and schools. Findings revealed that the main barriers to parental involvement among Mexican parents are work, language and lack of childcare. The study discusses some strategies that schools can use to help parents overcome barriers to involvement. This research is important because for the first time it uses communications, and more specifically public relations theories, to further the research on Hispanic parental involvement.

INDEX WORDS: Situational theory of publics, Relationship management, Publics, Parental Involvement, Mexican parents, Education

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LINDA C PÉREZ

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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May 2012

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband and daughter who supported me all the way through this process. They were there for me every day and were very patient when I needed it the most. I love you with all my heart.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I started the master's program almost five years ago, I wasn't sure about my motivations. During this long process, I questioned myself many times and even tried to quit out of desperation. But there were people who wouldn't let me, and deep inside I knew I wouldn't do it. If it weren't for my husband's unconditional support, I wouldn't be writing these words. He pushed me when he had to and went the extra mile to make sure I had the time and money to finish this program. All I can say is “gracias.” My parents and brother were also there for me, and reminded me all the time that all we have in life is our education. A big *gracias* for them as well. I always want to make them proud, and I know this means a lot to them.

I would also like to acknowledge my adviser, Dr. Natalie Tindall. She didn't let me quit and pushed me without overwhelming me. She helped me find a project that would combine my passions and interests and would help me grow as a professional and as a person. My committee members were also very helpful during this process. I'm very thankful for their commitment and their willingness to share their knowledge and time.

All these years I have also had the support of my dear friends, colleagues, and coworkers. They listened patiently, gave me great advice, covered for me when I had class, cheered me up, and helped me in different ways. I would like to thank especially those who helped me recruit participants for this thesis. Isabel Sance Valverde, Jenny Obando, Belisa Urbina, and Angela Campbell, thank you very much for your help. Without you, this wouldn't have been possible. Special thanks to my participants. Thank you for opening the doors of your houses and your hearts. I learned a lot from you, and you made me think about my role as a mother. I admire you and wish you the best.

Finally, I would like to thank my daughter. You're my inspiration, and I want to be yours. Thank you for giving me the strength and motivation to finish this program and this thesis. Thank you for being

so patient and understanding. I love you more than anything in this world and will always be there for you.

Gracias a todos.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Hispanics are the nation's largest and fastest-growing minority group. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 50.5 million Hispanics live in the United States as of 2010, and by 2050 approximately 30% of the U.S. population will be of Hispanic origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In 2010, 31.8 million Mexican-Americans lived in the U.S., representing 63% of the U.S. Hispanic population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). This growth is reflected greatly in public kindergarten through 12th grade schools. In 2008, one in five students in the nation's public kindergartens, elementary, middle, and high schools were Hispanic (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). In 2009, 22.5% of children living in the United States were of Hispanic origin, and by 2050, 39% of U.S. children are projected to be Hispanic (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2010).

Between 1987 and 2007, the number of Hispanic students enrolled in the country's public schools nearly doubled, accounting for 60% of the total growth in public school enrollments over that period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009b). However, this unparalleled growth has also brought its consequences. For instance, in 2009, fourth-grade Hispanic students scored 21 points below their non-Hispanic white counterparts in a national mathematics assessment (National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), 2009). For eighth graders in 2009, the White-Black achievement gap was 32 points, and the White-Hispanic achievement gap was 26 points (NAEP, 2009). Moreover, the high school graduation rate for Hispanic students has been consistently lower than for other ethnic and racial groups, despite an increase from 57% in 1980 to 76% in 2008 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2010). A key factor to close this achievement gap is parental involvement, but Hispanic parents are known for their low-to-nonexistent school participation (De Gaetano, 2007).

To close the achievement gap, U.S. Congress passed and then-president George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (No Child Left Behind, 2001; Roach, 2006). This law calls for

increasing school accountability, improving test scores, and meeting the needs of low-performing students attending high poverty schools as well as students with limited English proficiency, children with disabilities, American Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance (No Child Left Behind, 2001). NCLB could accomplish its purpose through affording parents meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children, such as being part of the decision making process regarding programs and school policies, and being constantly informed about their children's and school's performance (No Child Left Behind, 2001). An example of how schools have implemented parental involvement initiatives is the creation of parental information and resource centers that provide comprehensive training, information, and support to parents. This is an important component of the law, given that a number of studies have shown that parental involvement can have a powerful influence on grades, graduation rates, and college attendance (Mireles-Rios & Romo, 2010). It is difficult to prove that parental involvement policies mandated by NCLB have been effective, mainly because the law does not specify what model educators need to follow to increase parents' involvement in schools (Kugler, 2009). Stevenson and Laster (2008) concluded that states had challenges to comply with requirements for parental involvement, and Webster (2004) also criticized the lack of clear direction to implement parental involvement programs.

However, Latino parents face challenges with school participation. As a group, Hispanic parents have low or nonexistent school participation rates (De Gaetano, 2007), which make Latino students less likely to succeed in school and close the achievement gap. Donald (2009) argued that Latino parents do not understand the American educational system and that they often hesitate to get involved because they find it difficult to communicate. These parents face other barriers or constraints, including language, poverty, and immigration issues (Donald, et al., 2005) that prevent Latino parents from getting involved. The culture of many Hispanic groups dictate that the care of the children falls on the mother's hands; for the mothers, it is difficult for them to attend parent-teacher conferences or other school

functions because they may not have a way to get there or have someone who can take care of their children (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atiles, 2005).

Using the situational theory of publics as the theoretical backdrop, I determined how Hispanic parents respond to their children's education, based on their level of involvement, constraints, and recognition of the problem. This study provides some guidance on which is the best way to engage Hispanic parents and get them more involved. This study is important because for the first time it uses communications, and more specifically public relations theories, to further the research on Hispanic parental involvement. Furthermore, this study has practical implications for school systems that can put to use public relations theories to better communicate with and engage Latino parents.

Definitions

This section will provide definitions for the terms used throughout this study: culture, Hispanics, White, Black, publics, and the achievement gap.

Culture. There is not a widely accepted definition for culture. Geertz (1970) defined culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life" (p. 89). Sneddon (2003) defined culture as "a way that certain people live" (p. 26). Toomela (2003) considered culture as "socially shared information that is coded in symbols" (p. 37). Durant and Shepherd (2009) perceived culture to be "a matter of continuously reconstructed identities that range from age-cohort affiliation and sexual orientation, through loyalty to sports teams or involvement in particular interests or hobbies, to participant roles and other situational factors" (p. 148). For this study, I used Geertz definition to describe the Hispanic culture in general and how this group's views and beliefs shape their perception of parental involvement in schools.

Hispanic and Latino. For quite some time in the United States, there has been a debate on which term to use: Hispanic or Latino (Alcoff, 2005). Gracia (2000) argued that Hispanic should be the term

used to designate all the people that share a historical tie to the encuentro (the discovery of America in 1492). Moreover, the U.S. Census Bureau defined Hispanics as persons who indicated that their origin was Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or some other Hispanic origin. Hayes-Bautista and Chapa (1987) argued that Latino is a generic term that should be used to refer to persons residing in the United States who were born or whose ancestors were born in Latin America. For this thesis, the terms Hispanic and Latino were used interchangeably to refer to the broader population of people who either speak Spanish at home or consider themselves of Hispanic or Latino origin.

Mexican and Mexican-American. Mexicans are defined as individuals born in Mexico or naturalized citizens of that country. The term Mexican-American refers to Hispanics who were born in Mexico or U.S.-born Hispanics who trace their ancestry to Mexico (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). In this thesis, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are both considered of Hispanic or Latino origin, therefore, the findings of studies reviewed about Hispanics and Latinos apply to Mexicans and Mexican Americans as well.

Black. The U.S. Census Bureau equates the terms Black and African American and defines them as “a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as ‘Black, African Am., or Negro,’ or provide written entries such as African American, Afro American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian”. In this study I will use the term Black because it is the most common used term in education and public relations literature, which serve as the theoretical base for this research.

White. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) defines White as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "White" or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Near Easterner, Arab, or Polish”. Having in mind that Hispanics may identify themselves as being of White race, in this study I will use the term non-Hispanic white to refer to people of White origin.

Publics. The concept of the public is the core of the research and practice of public relations. Hallahan (2000) defined public as "a group of people who relate to an organization, who demonstrate varying degrees of activity or passivity, and who might or might not interact with others concerning their relationship" (p. 502). In contextualizing his situational theory of publics, J. Grunig (1997) grounded his concept of publics in Dewey's (1927) and Blumer's (1966) assertions that publics arise around issues or problems that affect them. Publics, according to J. Grunig (1997), "begin as disconnected systems of individuals experiencing common problems; but they can evolve into organized and powerful activist groups" (p. 9). Hauser (2007) defined public as "an emergent body of those who are tending to an issue through their active participation in the deliberative processes that bear on it" (p. 335). In this study, I will use Hallahan's definition because it is the one that better describes Hispanic parents as a public because these parents have a relationship with their children's school, demonstrate different levels of activity or passivity, and have different levels of interaction with each other.

Public relations. Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined public relations as "the management of communications between an organization and its publics" (p. 6). Banks (2000) advanced Grunig and Hunt's definition, suggesting that public relations should be conceptualized with a view that includes the social consequences of its practice. For Banks, public relations is the "management of communication between an institution and its publics for the purpose of nurturing positive and mutually supportive communities." (p. 25). Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2008) and L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) included the concept of relationship building and management-level responsibilities in their definitions of public relations. For Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000), public relations is "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success of failure depends" (p. 6). L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) defined public relations as a managerial function that helps organizations build relationships with its internal and external publics.

For this study, I will use Banks' definition because it best describes the relationship between the school system and parents and because it was proposed as a part of a study of multicultural public relations.

Delimitations

There are several delimitations for this study. First, the Hispanic population is very diverse. Of the more than fifty million Hispanics living in the U.S., more than 31 million are of Mexican origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), followed by persons of Puerto Rican (4.6 million), Cuban (1.7 million), Salvadoran (1.6 million), Dominican (1.4 million), and Guatemalan (1 million) origins. These differences in country of origin could condition the responses and points of view of participants in the study. Such differences also affect the academic performance of children in school. According to the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2007), children of Mexican and Central American descent had the lowest reading readiness levels when entering kindergarten. The strongest reading readiness levels were found among children of South American origin. These results show that parents from different countries of origin may have different influences on their children and their education. Second, there was concern that participants may have fear retaliation if they gave negative responses about their children's schools (Columna, Senne & Lyttle, 2009). This concern was addressed in the informed consent, which clearly stated that the information participants provide will not affect in any way any service they or their children receive.

Significance of this Project

As the Hispanic population continues to grow in the United States, so does the number of Latino students enrolled in the nation's public schools (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). These students are, however, in academic disadvantage compared to their peers. In my years as an education reporter for a Hispanic newspaper in the Atlanta metro area, I witnessed the challenges that schools, parents, and students faced, especially in districts with high concentrations of Hispanics. I interviewed numerous educators who expressed their frustration because they could not get Hispanic parents to participate in school ac-

tivities. Yet, I heard from parents who wanted to participate but could not. These parents found the education system difficult to navigate or just did not have enough time to spend with their children because they had multiple jobs. Having this knowledge, I started doing academic research and found out that there scholars studied issues related to parental involvement and Hispanics, but I found that little research had been conducted from a communications perspective. Moreover, no studies focused specifically on public relations theories, so I decided to explore this area, studying Mexican parents as a public and their relationship with their children's schools.

The purpose of this study was to determine how Mexican and Mexican-American parents make meaning of their children's education and parental involvement in education. The situational theory of publics provided the theoretical framework to examine to what extent Mexican and Mexican-American parents see their participation on their children's education as a problem, how involved they are in their children's education, and what factors constrain them from seeking information that allows them to be more engaged.

This study is important because it can help further the research on Hispanic parental involvement from a communications perspective and has practical implications for school systems that can put to use public relations theories to better communicate and engage Latino parents. Most previous studies related to parental involvement are based on education theories and do not see the problem of low parental involvement among Hispanic parents as a communications problem. In that sense, schools could benefit from the application of communications theories to either implement or evaluate and modify parental involvement programs and at the same time improve academic achievement among their Mexican and Mexican-American students. More precisely, findings from this study can be helpful to Title I schools that are required by law to have in place initiatives that promote parental involvement and maintain a good communication with parents (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

Outline of the thesis. In the second chapter, I will introduce and review the situational theory of publics, outline the basis of the relational management approach in public relations, and describe the main challenges Hispanic parents have when dealing with the public education system, as well as some initiatives that have been successful in engaging Latino parents. Finally, I pose my Research Questions and explain the rationale behind them. Chapter Three is the Methods Section, and I explain why I chose qualitative research as my method and discuss its implications. In the fourth chapter I will present the results of the study, and in the last chapter of this thesis, I will discuss the findings and present limitation, implications, and conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The purpose of this research was to examine how Hispanic parents make meaning of their children's education. To frame this issue, I will review literature relevant to public relations theory and education from a Hispanic perspective.

The Situational Theory of Publics

Aldoory (2001) considered the situational theory of publics as "one of the most useful theories for understanding why publics communicate and when they are most likely to communicate." (p. 163). J. Grunig (1997) argued that the theory was designed to predict publics' responsiveness to issues, the amount and nature of communication behavior of a public, the effects of communication on cognition, attitudes, and behavior; and the likelihood of engaging in collective action to pressure the organization, or activism. The situational theory later evolved into a tool that helps public relations practitioners

> … to segment stakeholders into publics, to isolate the strategic publics with whom it is most important for organizations to develop relationships in order to be effective, and to plan different strategies for communicating with publics whose communication behaviors range from active to passive. (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008, p. 332)

At its current state, the situational theory of publics consists of two dependent variables and three independent variables. The dependent variables are concerned with the deliberate, active communication behaviors (information seeking) and with the passive absorption of information (information processing) (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; J. Grunig, 1997). Three independent variables are used to predict communication behavior and determine how much an individual will engage in either information processing or information seeking. Problem recognition is the process by which people detect that something needs to be done about a situation and think about what to do. Level of involvement is the extent to which people connect themselves to an issue (J. Grunig, 1997). Constraint recognition refers to the

perceived or actual barriers that prevent people from doing something about a problem (Aldoory, Kim, & Tindall, 2010).

Of the three independent variables, level of involvement is one of the most researched by communication scholars (Aldoory, 2001). It is particularly important to study involvement, because it has been demonstrated that persons with high involvement are more likely to analyze issues more frequently and attain greater knowledge levels (Aldoory, 2001). Moreover, high involvement can lead to active information seeking. Several studies have shown that the higher the levels of problem recognition and involvement, the more likely a public would be willing to seek information and communicate actively about an issue (Aldoory, 2001). High levels of constraint recognition lead to low levels of information seeking and information processing (Kim & Grunig, 2011). The lower the levels of involvement, the lower the levels of information seeking; and the higher the levels of involvement, the higher the levels of information processing (Figure 1).

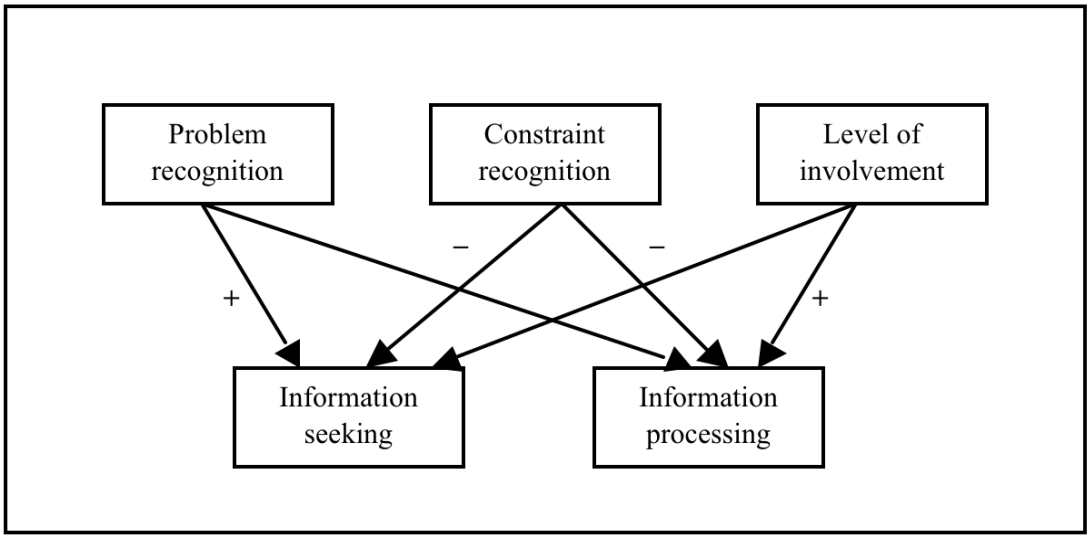

Figure 1. Independent and dependent variables in the situational theory of publics and relationship between them.

Types of publics. Active publics have low constraint recognition and high problem recognition and involvement; they are actively seeking information and are potentially sharing information with others. Aware publics have high problem recognition and involvement, but due to high levels of constraint recognition, they usually are not moved to act. Latent publics have low problem recognition, but medium to high levels of involvement (Aldoory and Sha, 2007). Nonpublics have no knowledge of a problem and are not involved (Hallahan, 2000). Figure 2 shows how publics evolve depending on their levels of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement.

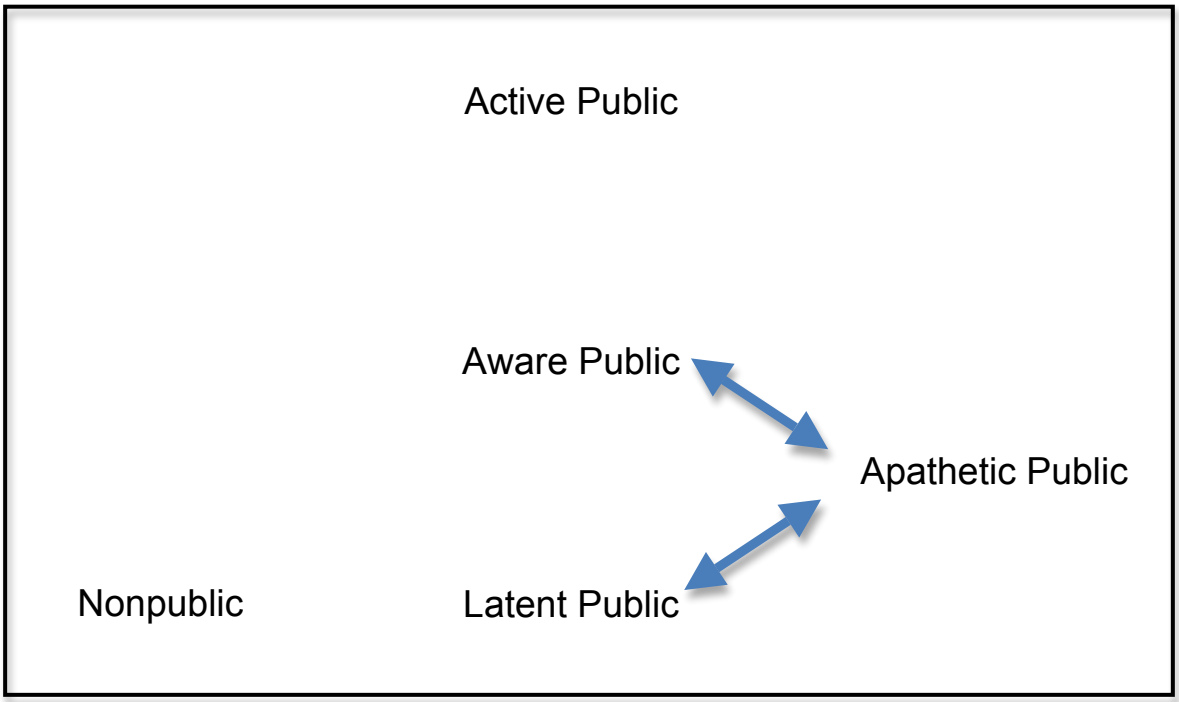

Figure 2. Types of publics. Figure 2 shows how publics change according to their levels of problem recognition, constraint recognition and involvement.

Table 1. Types of publics according to the situational theory of publics.

	Active publics	Aware publics	Latent publics	Nonpublics
Problem recognition	High	High	Low	No
Constraint recognition	Low	High		No
Level of Involvement	High	High	Medium-High	No

Hallahan (2000) proposed a new model and focused his research on inactive publics, which are created when nonpublics attain any level of knowledge or involvement. Hallahan defined inactive publics as groups with low involvement and low knowledge in an organization. The author argued that it is important to study and consider inactive publics because they represent a sizeable portion of the population and oftentimes they are the target of many communications and public relations campaigns. According to Hallahan (2000), when an individual or group have high levels of involvement with an organization it is more likely that they feel motivated to respond to an organization's public relations efforts. Moreover, the extent to which an individual or group is knowledgeable about an organization, influences their ability to understand the messages and respond to them. These studies were relevant to this research because its purpose was to determine what type of public Mexican and Mexican-American parents are, and based on that classification what is the best way to communicate with them and motivate them to get more involved in their children's education.

Based on the interaction between the independent and dependent variables, J. Grunig (1997) classified publics into four categories: all-issue publics, apathetic publics, single-issue publics, and hot-issue publics. According to J. Grunig (1997), all issue-publics are active on all concerns; apathetic publics are inattentive to all problems; single issue publics are active on a small subset of concerns that affect only a portion of the population (e.g. recall of a product); and hot-issue publics are active only on a problem that involves almost all the population and has received extensive media coverage (e.g. gas prices). See Appendix A for a summary of main concepts of the situational theory of publics.

Role of culture in situational theory of publics. By the late nineteenth century, anthropologists defined culture as "the systematic way of constructing reality that a people acquires as a consequence of living in a group" (Real, 2001). Many other definitions followed and became accepted in different disciplines. Geertz (1970) defined culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in

symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life" (p. 89). Sneddon (2003) defined culture as "a way that certain people live" (p. 26). Toomela (2003) saw culture as "socially shared information that is coded in symbols" (p. 37). Culture, per Hecht, Jackson, and Pitts (2005), "provides our norms, values, and practices; it defines our communities and our relationships" (p. 22). Under the scope of culture, scholars have also studied the process of acculturation, especially when doing research about immigrants.

In recent years, public relations scholars have used culture to predict responses to messages or analyze public's behaviors. For instance, some scholars (Curry, 2007; Vardeman, 2005; Vardeman & Tindall, 2008) examined how culture and identity could condition women's response to and attitude towards health messages. Vardeman and Tindall (2008) concluded that hierarchical, categorical segmentation theories might not be the best tool to plan culturally competent campaigns and messages. The authors specifically criticized the National Heart and Lung and Blood's Heart Truth campaign because the campaign excluded some women of color from its messages and images and focused its messages on older women, ignoring concerns from younger women. Curry (2007) studied black women and their meaning making of HIV/AIDS messages and found that race and media representations of race have an impact of information processing of targeted messages. The participants generally ignored messages related with HIV/AIDS because the campaigns did not represent their identities and failed "to address constraints associated with their identity" (p. 77). These findings are relevant because they reflect the importance of considering culture when communicating with minorities, particularly when dealing with important issues like health and education.

Cultural identity plays an important factor in the segmentation of organizational publics (Sha, 2006). Sha argued that, in situations where avowed cultural identity is salient, "differences in identification with a cultural group will predict differences in the variables of the situational theory of publics" (p.

45). In her research on cultural identity and messages, Sha found that racioethnic identity is a predictor for most of the variables of the situational theory of publics with the exception of constraint recognition. These findings led her to contend that the referent criterion, a fourth variable of the situational theory of publics that James Grunig dropped (J. Grunig, 1997), should be reintroduced because data suggested that "if a person identifies with a given culture, he or she may behave according to that culture's rules regardless of the situation at hand" (p. 60).

Referent criterion. J. Grunig (1997) defined the referent criterion as "a solution carried from previous situations to a new situation" (p. 11). Kim and Grunig (2011) defined the referent criterion as "any knowledge or subjective judgmental system that influences the way in which one approaches problem solving" (p.131). According to the authors, a person who has a problem and refers to a referent criterion may have lower levels of information seeking. Conversely, if the person has difficulties retrieving a solution from previous experiences, he or she is more likely to engage in active communication behavior. Moreover, a person will have higher levels of information processing when a referent criterion is present.

Sriramesh, Moghan, and Wei (2007) concluded that the referent criterion variable should be reintroduced because the variable helped to include culture as an independent variable of the situational theory of publics. By reincorporating referent criterion as an independent variable, the situational theory would be able to include sociopolitical diversity and be less ethnocentric (Sriramesh et al., 2007). Kim and Grunig (2011) followed other scholars and reintroduced the referent criterion variable, and also introduced a subjective aspect of the referent criterion – the presence of wishful or willful thinking toward the resolution of a problem: "The stronger presence of these self-fulfilling decisional referents will result in more information seeking, selecting, and giving in problem solving" (p. 131). The inclusion of this variable is key to this study because it can help understand what cultural factors affect the commu-

nication behavior of Mexican and Mexican-American parents and identify previous situations or experiences that shape their view of their children's education (e.g. their own educational experience.)

Acculturation

Acculturation is defined as a sociological process in which cultural change results from contact between two autonomous and independent cultural groups (Smokowski et al, 2008). Berry (2003) and Kohatsu (2005) defined acculturation as the process of learning about and adopting the dominant group's cultural values, behaviors, and beliefs. Acculturation is a different process than assimilation. Assimilation also refers to the belief that it is best for society if immigrants abandon their own cultural practices and adopt those of the mainstream society (Ryan, Casas, & Thompson, 2010). Smokowski et al. (2008) later defined acculturation as a process of cultural involvement that has two subcomponents: "(a) the extent to which the acculturating individual or group retains *culture-of-origin involvement* and (b) the extent to which *host culture involvement* is established" (p. 295). The level of acculturation varies according to the amount of first-hand contact and interaction an immigrant has with services, schools, people, media, and the community in the dominant culture (Christenson, Zabriskie, Eggett, & Freeman, 2006). To cope with this process, people who have temporarily or permanently relocated to a new country, as well as ethnic groups inside a dominant culture, engage in one of four acculturation strategies: a) integration with, b) separation from, c) assimilation to the dominant majority, and d) social marginalization (Berry, 1999).

Recent theoretical developments in acculturation theory suggest that acculturation occurs at three levels (Castillo & Caver, 2009). The behavioral component consists of language usage, daily living habits, and cultural expressions such as music or television shows. The affective component refers to attitudes toward one's cultural identifications and attitudes and level of comfort toward people or indigenous and dominant groups (Kim & Abreu, 2001). The cognitive component consists of cultural values. Values refer to the attitudes and beliefs about cultural traditions as well as gender role beliefs and

expectations (Castillo & Caver, 2009). These multiple dimensions of acculturation are important when studying the relationship of Mexican mothers with their children's schools in the United States.

Acculturation in Mexican-American Culture. In the United States, acculturation typically involves the White American cultural group (dominant or host group) and a racial or ethnic minority group, which have different norms for their respective groups (Castillo & Caver, 2009). For this study, the ethnic group is Mexican and Mexican-American parents, who like all other immigrants, go through different levels of acculturation and have to deal with this process as part of their daily lives. As they go through the acculturation process, Mexican and, in general, Latino parents, face several hurdles.

Acculturation may disrupt the traditional close family ties among Latino parents and children (Wilson, 2009). At the same time, Mexican parents find incompatibilities between Hispanic and U.S. cultures, which can turn into parental isolation and lack of social support (Wilson 2009). Moreover, Zapata and Katims (1994) suggested that, although traditional Mexican parents tend to be authoritarian, they often become less consistent in their use of discipline and less effective in monitoring their children's behaviors as they become more "Americanized." The difference in use of language between Mexican parents and their children is also an issue, as parents prefer to use Spanish, yet their children prefer English, the language they are more exposed to at school (Wilson, 2009).

Collectivism in Mexican culture. The Mexican society is considered a collectivistic culture (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). Collectivism is related to solidarity, concern for others, and integration. In collectivistic societies, the goals, needs, and views of the in-group are prioritized over those of the individual (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995; Forbes, et. al, 2011). Cooperation is related to collectivism. The majority of the studies related to collectivism are concerned with a sense of duty to a group, relatedness to others, seeking others' advice, harmony, and working with a group.

Familism in Mexican culture. Because of the collectivistic nature and culture of the Hispanic culture in general and Mexican culture in general, people from Mexico tend to be more family-oriented

than non-Hispanic whites and have larger family networks (Rodriguez et al., 2007). The term *familism* describes Latinos' strong identification with the nuclear and extended family, strong attachments to the family, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among family members (Rodriguez et al., 2007). Familism stresses that family is at the center of one's life and affects all the relationships between members of the family and the behavior of the individuals when interacting with others outside their family (Estrada-Martinez, Padilla, Caldwell, & Schulz, 2011). Familism is believed to be the most important factor influencing the lives of Latinos (Cooley, 2001).

Some scholars have framed familism within three dimensions: structural, behavioral, and attitudinal (Steidel & Contreras, 2003). The structural dimension defines the spatial and social boundaries where behavior occurs and attitudes acquire meaning. An example of this dimension would include behaviors like establishing a certain house as the meeting point for all family reunions. The behavioral dimension refers to the behaviors associated to feelings and attitudes about the family. Examples of this dimension include behaviors such as visiting family members or calling relatives. The attitudinal dimension refers to "the normative commitment of family members to the family and to family relationships, which supersedes attention to the individual" (Steidel & Contreras, p. 313). Some of the values observed at this dimension are loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of a family, which translate into behaviors like taking care of an ailing relative or cooking dinner for the whole family on special occasions.

The definitions of familism highlight the importance of unity, adherence to specific roles in public situations, and deference to authority figures (Estrada-Martinez, et al., 2011). However, these traits may be affected by the experience of migration, according to Estrada-Martinez et al. (2011). Traditionally, Mexican families, particularly in small towns, reside in close proximity (Boehm, 2008). An example of this is San Marcos, a town in the state of San Luis Potosí, Mexico. For most of the 20th century, sons and daughters-in-law lived in the same house or next to his parents' house. Conversely, daughters

moved in to the homes of their husband's family (Boehm, 2008). Many families get separated when one of the parents migrates, finding it difficult to maintain this structure. According to Boehm, Mexicans migrate to the United States to fulfill their role as parents and providers. Men migrate to fulfill their responsibility of providing for their family, and women migrate to meet their male partners or because they need to provide for their children after being abandoned by their partners.

Once they migrate, Mexicans face a harsh reality. Many Latino immigrant parents face a society that does not value their work and educational experiences. As Estrada-Martinez et al. (2011) noted, "For more recent Latino immigrants, the dearth of culturally affirming, bilingual education can exclude them from full societal participation, encouraging disengagement from schools for parents and their children" (p. 1041). Moreover, in families where adolescent children are more proficient than their parents in English, the status and authority hierarchy may be inverted, affecting the ability of parents to monitor and control their children (Estrada-Martinez et al., 2011). Other systemic factors that affect the expression of familism and are felt at the family level are economic pressures and job instability that interfere with parents' ability to meet with teachers and to stay with their children after school hours.

Familism is one of three goals that Latinos from all origins hold and underline many parenting decisions (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). The other two goals are *respeto* (respect) and *educación* (education). According to Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy (2006), the goal of *respeto* is to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships through respect to self and others. In Mexican culture, *respeto* has a broader meaning than the word respect, in that the former includes respecting the role of each member in the family (Valdés, 1996). For instance, sisters do not show signs of affection toward their boyfriends in front of their brothers because it is considered a lack of *respeto*. A third goal for Latino parents is *educación*. Different from education, *educación* refers to teaching morality, responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. Mexican-American parents consider a well-educated child as one who shows good manners, high morals, respectfulness, honesty, and politeness Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006).

Individualism in American culture. The culture of the United States is generally described as individualistic (Triandis, 1988). Individualistic societies are centered on the needs and desires of the individuals (Forbes, et. al, 2011). On this type of societies, youths are encouraged to be economically and socially independent, and to make decisions for themselves (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995). Competition is related to individualism, as cooperation is related to collectivism. Individualists are more likely to prioritize their own goals over those of the group (Shulruf, et. al, 2011).

When immigrant parents arrive to the U.S., they find a child-centered culture, where there is room for negotiation and reasoning (Nesteruk & Marks, 2011). American parents are more involved in their children's academic lives and have higher expectations for their children to attend college than Latino parents (Wells, et. al, 2011). According to Wells et al. (2011), research indicates that parent express higher expectations for daughters to enroll in college. White parents have higher expectations for daughters than Latino parents. White and Black parents were more involved with their daughters while Latino parental involvement did not significantly differ based on the child's gender.

The relational approach in public relations

One of the objectives of this study was to provide suggestions for schools to improve their relationships and communication with Mexican parents. The relational approach in public relations serves as a framework to establish the parameters of a good relationship and determine better ways of engaging parents. During the last two decades, scholars have manifested special interest in the study of relationship management as an effective approach to public relations. Different scholars have found that the relationship management perspective serves as a theoretical framework for the practice of public relations and provides a method of evaluation for scholars and practitioners. Moreover, the relational perspective has demonstrated how organization-public relationships can enhance the organization's ability to achieve its mission, by finding balance between organizational and public interests (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004). This approach has changed the traditional perception of public relations, from a com-

munications activity, to a management function that uses communication strategically (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). For instance, the relationship management approach helps practitioners develop public relations programs around relationship goals, which can be attained by using communication strategies, according Ledingham and Bruning (1998).

Bruning and Ledingham (1999) stated that this shift to a relational approach has motivated practitioners to focus more on building, developing, and maintaining organization-public relations, as opposed to manipulating public opinion. The key, according to the authors, is that practitioners think of the relationship with their publics as a mutually beneficial relationship. In addition, the application of the relational approach has allowed practitioners to develop better tools to evaluate the success of communication programs, based on attitudinal, evaluative, and, or, behavioral changes, motivated by the conception, development and continuation of mutually beneficial organization-public relationships (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

To evaluate the quality of organization public relationships, four indicators of relationships have been extensively used. (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). These indicators are trust, control mutuality, relational satisfaction, and relational commitment (Ni, 2009). Trust means one's confidence on the other party and willingness to open up to the other party. Control mutuality refers to the degree of agreement between the two parts about who decides relationship goals and how power in the relationship is balanced. Relational satisfaction is the extent to which both parties are satisfied with the relationship, and relational commitment refers to the extent to which each party believes the relationship is worth maintaining (Ni, 2009). See Appendix B for a summary of main concepts of the relational approach.

The idea of a dialogue between an organization and its publics is also tied in to the success of the relational approach (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Kent and Taylor suggested that dialogue is the ideal way of building ethical and fulfilling relationships, facilitating an interactive communication. For Kent and Taylor (1998), "for a dialogic relationship to exist, parties must view communicating with each other as

the goal of a relationship" (p. 324). Kent and Taylor (2002) identified five dialogic tenets. Mutuality, or the recognition of organization-public relationships. Propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics. Empathy, or the supportiveness and reaffirmation of public objectives and interests. Risk, or the willingness to interact with groups or individuals under their own terms, and commitment, or the extent to which an organization opts for dialogue, understanding and interpretation in its interaction with publics. Kent and Taylor recognized that even though dialogic relationships are the desired outcome, using dialogue requires commitment of resources and openness from the organization. When dialogue is achieved, the organization receives more public support, and improves its reputation. For publics, "dialogue can mean increased organizational accountability, a greater say in organizational operations, and increased public satisfaction" (Kent and Taylor, 2002 p. 30).

The relational approach has been used to manage and evaluate relationships in different settings, like multinational corporations and their employees (Ni, 2009), government-community relationships (Johnston, 2010), and nonprofit organizations-donors relationships (Waters, 2008). Public relations theories have been used to manage nonprofit higher education institutions (Lee, 2011). Public K-12 schools have also used public relations tools to manage their relationships, but they have focused mainly in mass media (Carr, 2006; Carr, 2007), social media (McCrea, 2010), and crisis management (Gainey, 2009). There is no evidence that the relations approach has been specifically used at this level, but it would be beneficial to apply its principles in an education setting, in particular in Title I schools that are required to build and improve relationships with parents. This approach can also be used to build mutually beneficial relationships between school officials and Mexican and Mexican-American parents and in combination with the situational theory of publics, determine the best strategies for educators to reach out to Latino families and motivate them to participate more on school activities and ultimately help their children improve their academic performance.

Latinos and Education

Mexican education system. To understand the differences that Mexican families meet when they migrate and have to navigate a new school system, it is useful to understand the Mexican education system. Mexico's General Education Law establishes three types of education: basic, medium-higher, and higher. Basic education is divided into three levels: preschool, elementary and middle. Starting in school year 2005-2006, preschool education for 4-year olds and 5-year olds became mandatory. In order to move to the medium-higher level, students must obtain an official certificate after they finish the last grade of middle school. The medium-higher level is comprised of high school and technical education.

Education in Mexico is a right. According to the General Education Law, "every individual has the right to be educated. The Federal Government, States, Federal District and Municipalities will provide preschool, elementary and secondary education" (SEP, 2009, p. 6). For the 2009-2010 school year there were 33.9 million students registered in the national school system, or 31.5 percent of the total of the country's population.

One of the main concerns about education in Mexico is the increasing rate of school dropouts. In the 2006-2007 school year, the dropout rate from public high schools in Mexico was about 7.8 percent (Muñoz, 2010). Among the reasons for these rates are external factor such as poverty, unemployment and low income that force students to drop out to get a job. Other factors include lack of family support, violence, abandonment, substance abuse and teen pregnancy. From a school standpoint, low academic achievement, failure to pass tests, behavior problems, and teachers' authoritarian style (Tapia, et al 2010).

On his analysis about the current situation of Mexican education, Alberto Círigo dedicated a special section to describe the relationship between parents and their children's schools and teachers. Círigo (2010) interviewed Patricia Jimenez, who has been a teacher for 20 years in different Mexican

public schools. Jimenez said that the divorce between parents and teachers has become a barrier that impedes teamwork: “When we have meetings, all parents do is complaining, and recently they have seen the school as a daycare; they have substituted their duties as parents and they do not supervise homework, they don’t communicate with their children and don’t teach them values” (p. 23).

When Mexicans migrate to the United States, they find some differences between their education system and the American education system.

Latinos and education in the U.S. In 2008, around 10 million Hispanic children were students in the nation’s kindergartens, elementary, middle, and high schools (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). These staggering numbers have become a challenge to school officials and family professionals who have a hard time promoting educational development in Latino youth (Henry et al., 2008). Hispanic adolescents face a number of obstacles inside and outside the classroom. For instance, Latino adolescents are more likely that their non-Hispanic white counterparts to live in impoverished areas, and they have the highest high school dropout rates among all groups (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, & Bámaca, 2006).

These factors impact the academic outcome of Latino students and have contributed to the achievement gap between them and their non-Hispanic white peers. The achievement scores of Hispanic students in math and reading tests lag behind those of non-Hispanic white students (Ingels, Planty, & Bozick, 2005; Lee, Grigg, & Dion, 2007). In 2009, 88% of Hispanic students in high-poverty schools were not reading at grade level by fourth grade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Moreover, 82% of Hispanic students in schools with low or moderate rates of families living in poverty did not read at grade level. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (No Child Left Behind, 2001; Roach, 2006) attempts to close the gaps in Hispanic educational achievement. This law calls for more school accountability, improved test scores, and meeting the needs of low-performing students. One of the key strategies of the NCLB to attain its goals is to improve opportunities for parents to participate in the education of their children (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

Parental involvement. Parents influence their children's academic environment in different ways, like providing academic support at home or getting involved in school activities (Alfaro et al., 2006, De Gaetano, 2007). Parental involvement can have a powerful influence on getting good grades, improving graduation rates, and motivating college attendance (Mireles-Rios & Romo, 2010). For instance, a study of parent-child academic communication with Black elementary school students found that parents of high achievers had more supportive conversations about schoolwork with their children than parents of low achieving students (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000).

Clark (1983) found that parents of low achievers were less involved in their children's school and determined that parents of high achievers were in constant contact with their children's teachers and school, while parents of low achievers only visited the school when they were summoned by the teacher or principal to discuss their children's misbehavior or poor performance. Kugler (2009) concluded that some parents' behaviors help to predict student success and higher achievement. For instance, Kugler found out that children who were taken by their parents to performances were more likely to do better in math, and that children of parents who had higher expectations had better English language arts grades. Nonetheless, Kugler (2009) explained that the study did not show cause but its results could rather help "schools, researchers, and families to be introspective about what they are doing and how it might impact their children" (Kugler, 2009, p. 83).

For minority students, particularly students with Puerto Rican and Mexican origins, academic support from family members is a key factor that differentiates high and low grade point average performances (Alfaro et al., 2006; Newman et al., 2000; Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003). Furthermore, in Mireles-Rios and Romo's (2010) study of Mexican-American elementary school girls, the researchers found out that the parental support and communication about the value of education plays a major role in the academic success of girls who are at risk for failure in math. Hispanic parents, however, are known for low or nonexistent school participation rates (De Gaetano, 2007).

Quiocho and Daoud (2010) argued that Hispanics are interested in participating in their children's education and wish for them academic success, yet in the process of getting involved they encounter some obstacles. Some of the reasons for the low interaction of Latino parents with schools are mistrust of large bureaucracies, differences in parental expectations, negative attitudes of school personnel, and lack of school staff who speak the parents' language (De Gaetano, 2007). Also, some teachers and school administrators have negative perceptions about Hispanic parents' desire of being involved in their children's education. These teachers and administrators believe that Latino parents don't care about the school or their children's education because they do not attend school functions or respond to letters or meeting invitations, according to De Gaetano. Another constraint is that Latino parents usually misunderstand what is their role in their children's education and do not comprehend the concept of involvement as defined by the school (Quiocho & Daoud, 2010). Bohon, Macpherson, and Atiles (2005) suggested that cultural traditions are yet another barrier that impede Hispanic parents' involvement in their children's schools. Within Hispanic families, there are often distinct gender roles. Usually childcare falls on the mother's hands, therefore she is expected to act as liaison between the home and the school, leaving the father with little or no involvement on school matters (Bohon, Macpherson, and Atiles, 2005). However, when the mothers are called for parent-teacher conferences or to other school functions or volunteer opportunities they cannot attend due to lack of transportation and child care assistance. Poverty can also be a barrier to parental involvement among Hispanics (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Delgado-Gaitan suggested that resources play a role in the education of the children. Children who live in impoverished conditions —like many Latino children do- do not have access to the same resources as children of families with higher incomes. Therefore, parents from poor communities lack knowledge of the educational system and resources they need to support their children's schooling.

Other researchers have looked into what leads Hispanic parents to get involved in their children's education. A survey revealed that Hispanic parents wanted their children to learn English, be educated, obtain jobs, care for their families, and experiment happiness in their lives (Dyer, 2009). In this same study, parents viewed their role as one who provided a home, ensured school attendance, supported their children financially, and spent time together as a family. The main obstacles to achieve these dreams were their lack of knowledge of the English language, the need to further their own education, and their difficulties with managing time and money. These results helped the school to understand that they were focusing on trying to make Hispanic parents help their children with their homework, while the priorities for the parents were other.

Hwang and Vrongistinos (2010) found that most parents believed that the best means of contributing to their children's learning at home was assisting them in their homework. Fifteen percent answered that the best way was to be a good role model, and 52% said family activities or emotional support were the ideal. De Gaetano (2007) worked with three colleagues on a three-year project to engage Latino parents; this project focused on making their culture important to getting parents involved. Throughout the three years, the researchers conducted parent workshops, worked with teachers and facilitated the participation of parents in their children's classrooms, among other activities. All the activities were related to the importance of culture, family, and community in parent's lives. After the project concluded, the researchers suggested that "when Latino parents' cultures are focused on in positive ways, they are able to be engaged substantively in the schooling process of their children" (De Gaetano, 2007 p. 146).

Research Questions

Based on the theories reviewed, I posed the following Research Questions:

RQ1. How do Mexican and Mexican-American parents make meaning of their children's education?

With this question, I was able to determine the level of involvement, problem recognition, and constraint recognition. This helped me determine what kind of public Mexican and Mexican-American parents are and served as base for the communication outreach suggestions made to schools. I also took into consideration the fourth variable of the situational theory of publics—the referent criterion—that framed the cultural context of this group of parents.

RQ2. What type of publics are Mexican and Mexican-American parents according to the situational theory of publics?

With this question I was able to determine what kind of public Mexican and Mexican-American parents are (i.e. active, aware, latent, nonpublic). This information is important because it helped me determine what kinds of message are better to engage these parents.

RQ3. How can schools better engage Mexican and Mexican-American parents?

With this question, I explored the dynamics of the relational approach in public relations and how they can be applied to the educational setting. According to the literature, it is ideal for organizations to maintain mutually beneficial relationships with their publics. One of the objectives of this research was to make recommendations on how schools can build and maintain mutually beneficial, symmetrical relationships with Mexican and Mexican-American parents, and ultimately increase parental involvement and academic achievement among Latino students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

This study used the situational theory of publics to segment parents and determine their levels of knowledge and involvement in regards to their children's education. In this section, I explain my use of qualitative methodology, specifically face-to-face interviews, and detail the procedures used to implement the study.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

No short, comprehensive definition of qualitative research exists (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2004). Nonetheless, Ulin, Robinson, and Tolley suggested that qualitative research is "the unique organizing framework is a theoretical and methodological focus on complex relations between (1) personal and social meanings, (2) individual and cultural practices, and (3) the material environment or context" (p. 4). Baxter and Babbie (2004) argued that qualitative research attempts to detail and understand the meaning making of certain phenomena or particular situations by group members. Jensen and Jankowski (1991) suggested that qualitative research is concerned with "meaning in phenomenological and contextual terms" and should be seen as a process "which is contextualized and inextricably integrated with wider social and cultural practices" (as cited in Potter, 1996, p. 7). The last part of the definition is relevant when considering cultural and language differences as factors that hinder Hispanic parents' involvement in schools (Columna, Senne, & Lytle, 2009). In qualitative research, the researcher makes a "commitment to seeing the social world from the point of view of the actor" (Bryman, 1984, p. 78), which constitutes one of the main differences between qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research was better suited for this study because it is more concerned with detail and the constitution of meaning in everyday phenomena (Lofland, 1971).

In-depth interview. Qualitative interviewing allows the interviewer to understand how people make meaning of the worlds they live and work in (H. Rubin & I. Rubin, 1995). H. Rubin and I. Rubin (1995) compared interviews to conversations and suggested that it is the best method to "hear the meanings, interpretations, and understandings that give shape to the worlds of the interviewees" (p. 7). Holstein and Gubrium (2003) described interviewing as "a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives" (p. 3).

Specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews to collect data. The in-depth interview allows researchers to enter the mind of the interviewee and understand the logic by which he or she sees the world (McCracken, 1988). The long interview was appropriate for this study because it was a format in which participants felt comfortable expressing themselves and I had time to ask them questions without the pressure of a group setting. Moreover, my experience as a news reporter and my background as a Spanish-speaking Hispanic immigrant helped me put participants at ease. My background also dealt with the reflexivity in research issue that Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker (2003) discussed. According to the authors, "too often, qualitative researchers have neglected discussions of the subjective lenses through which they view their research" (p. 135). However, sharing a cultural background with interviewees can be used to the advantage of the researcher and may help the interviewer better understand participants and shed light on the issues they face.

Instrumentation

The interview protocol (Appendix C) was modeled after Tindall and Vardeman-Winter's (2007) protocol that consisted of open-ended questions aimed at understanding how women of color make meaning of health communication. I added and modified questions to make them relevant to the education topic and Hispanic audience. For instance, I took Tindall and Vardeman-Winter's question "After viewing these pieces, how do you feel about heart disease as a(n) African American/Hispanic/Asian woman that may be different or unique from other groups affected by heart disease?" and changed to

"How do you feel about your child's education as a Mexican and Mexican-American parent? The protocol for this research consisted of questions designed to determine level of involvement (LOI), constraint recognition (CR), and problem recognition (PR) as defined by the situational theory of publics.

In addition, I included questions to measure information seeking (IS) behaviors and to find out how parents perceived their relationship with their children's schools (RM). Open-ended questions allowed me to guide the conversation and identify factors that may hinder or motivate parental involvement. I made changes to my initial protocol to address concerns and questions that aroused after pre-testing the interview instrument. First of all, I reworded some questions, writing them in a more simple way.

I conducted my pre-test interviews in Spanish so I had to alter the translation as well. Second, I also included new questions based on the responses I got during the pre-test interviews. For example, I realized that in all cases the mother was the one in charge of dealing with homework, getting the kids ready for school and talking to the teachers, so I included the question "In your family, who is in charge of dealing with schools, checking homework, getting children ready for school, etc.?" I also noticed a recurring theme with parents mentioning the presence of interpreters in meetings and parent-teacher conferences, so I included a question that addresses this issue.

Participants

In this section, I provide details about sampling and recruitment of participants for the study.

Sample. I conducted seventeen interviews with Mexican and Mexican-American mothers of children enrolled in the public school systems in DeKalb and Gwinnett counties. All of the participants were women because, as I talked with community organizers and contacts in the Hispanic community before I started recruiting, I realized that mothers were in charge of dealing with schools and school-related tasks. This observation is consistent with findings from Bohon, Macpherson, and Atiles (2005) who suggested that the culture of many Hispanic groups dictate that the care of the children falls into

the mother's hands. Therefore, for my research, the ideal participant was a mother who had school-aged children and had the time to share her insights. Immigration and socio-economic status, as well as education level, were not taken into consideration for recruitment. However, I tried to find Mexican and Mexican-American women with different backgrounds and ways of life.

In preparation for my study, I contacted several people I knew from my job as an education reporter. Two of them were especially helpful, as they let me present my project to support groups for Hispanic mothers. Also I contacted a local organization that serves the Hispanic community, hoping that they would let me post recruitment notices or let me talk to some of the parents that attended their workshops or received their services. However, I was never able to finalize an agreement, and I had to look for other sources that could help me find participants. For this research, it was very important to find a person who could introduce me to the women I was going to interview because I needed participants to trust me and to be open to share details about them and their families. For some the introductions were made personally, and others called some friends on my behalf and asked them if they would be interested in participating.

Recruitment. Once I had several participants secured, I used the snowball sampling technique to gather more participants. Snowball sampling is used when a complete sampling frame is unavailable or when it is difficult to have access to appropriate subjects for interviewing (Gray et al., 2007). This method is implemented by collecting data from the few members of the sample population who can be located and then asking those participants to provide the information needed to locate other members of the target population (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). One approach that resulted very effective was to ask parent liaisons in schools with large Hispanic enrollment to send a request to parents who could be interested in participating in the study. I also visited a community center at a local apartment complex, where I met and interview some mothers, who in turn introduced me to other neighbors and friends. Many of the interviews were scheduled personally during visits to schools' parent centers or community

centers, while others were scheduled over the phone. Nonetheless, the snowball approach did not always work. Some women promised they would ask their friends and relatives, but they never got back to me with an answer. I also faced disappointment as some women agreed to participate in the study, but when I went to their houses, they were not there or they kept postponing the interview indefinitely. Once I reached seventeen interviews, I felt the research had reached a saturation point. Data saturation occurs when the researcher determines additional interviews are not expected to yield new or valuable information (Cutliffe, 2000).

Demographic information. From September 2011 to March 2012, seventeen participants were interviewed. All of them were women, and were between the ages of 25 to 45 years old. Two were in the age range of 18-25; ten were in the age range of 26-35; and five were in the age range of 36-45. All but one were born in Mexico and spoke Spanish as their primary language. The other one was born in Texas and spoke English as her first language, but she was completely fluent in Spanish. The participants had an average of 2.3 children and had lived in the United States for an average of 9.3 years. Thirteen lived in DeKalb County, and four lived in Gwinnett. Four participants had only finished elementary school; nine went through high school; and four had college-level education. Table 2 gives detailed information about gender and ages of participants' children.

Table 2. Participants' children gender and ages.

Participant	Number of boys	Ages	Number of girls	Ages
1	1	7	1	18 months
2	0	0	2	12 and 11
3	2	17 and 15	2	19 and 7
4	3	10, 5 and 3	0	0
5	1	7	0	0
6	0	0	1	7
7	1	7	0	0
8	1	7	0	0
9	3	9, 7 and 4	0	0
10	1	10	1	5
11	1	11 and 3	0	0
12	0	0	2	13 and10
13	0	0	2	13 and 5
14	1	16 months	1	5

15	4	11, 10, 7 and 11 months	2	13 and 5
16	2	21 and 7	1	17
17	1	1 month	1	8
Total	**22**		**16**	

Procedures

Interviews were conducted in person from September 2011 to March 2012. Interviews varied in location and length, as I had to accommodate to the participants' needs and availability. In many cases, I let them choose the location, which was usually the participant's house. They all felt more comfortable doing it at their homes, although this implicated that sometimes there were distractions because they were taking care of their children. Some of the interviews took place at two different parent centers. Since women were already there for different reasons, it was easier to schedule two or three interviews at the same location. In these cases, I asked the participants if they felt comfortable talking about school-related issues, and they all said yes. Furthermore, I was able to secure a private office or area where they were assured nobody was listening. The rest of the interviews were conducted at a community center that has different outreach programs for Hispanic families. After voluntarily agreeing to participate in the study, each participant signed a consent form that explained the purpose of the investigation, possible risks, and possible benefits from participating in the research project. Confidentiality was assured to all participants and I made sure they knew they could remove themselves from the study at any time. Each of the participants received a copy of the consent form in Spanish and kept it for future reference. Once participants signed the informed consent documentation, I started the interview.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish. Only one participant responded partially in English because English is her first language. Most of the interviews lasted around 45 minutes. Some of them were shorter because participants had to tend to their children. At the beginning of the interview, I explained that I had to record the conversation in order to transcribe it later. All participants agreed, but some seemed hesitant because they thought I was going to videotape them, so I explained that I would

only record their voices. I started with the grand tour questions, defined by Fetterman (2010) as the questions designed to elicit a broad picture of the participant's world. I asked them about their families, their routine, and their general thoughts on education. These questions set the tome for more specific inquiries aimed at measuring the situational theory of publics' variables and principles of the relationship management approach. I had a semi-structured protocol, which gave me the chance to ask other questions if I found areas that I wanted to explore more. Given the low education levels of some of the participants, I had to explain them the questions several times, and at some times I changed subjects because they did not understand the question. Once the interview finished, I ask the participants if they had any questions and respond to their queries.

Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis process was to transcribe the interviews from the audio files. When applicable, the data was translated into English. I included on the transcripts contextual information from the notes taken during the interviews. McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003) suggested that researchers should include on their transcripts information about silence or pauses in conversation because "what is not said is just as important as what is said" (p. 66). I also kept a journal where I wrote my impressions after each interview. These notes were very helpful with the process of reflexivity required in qualitative research.

I used thematic analysis to analyze the data. According to King and Horrocks (2010), themes are "recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question." (p. 150). This system encompasses three steps: descriptive coding (consists of identifying parts of the transcript that are likely to be helpful to address the research question); interpretive coding (define codes that focus on the interpretation of participants' accounts' meanings); and defining overarching themes (identify key

themes and draw from theoretical ideas that underlie the research) (King & Horrocks, 2010). As I completed and transcribed interviews, I made notes that helped me improve my interviewer skills and ask relevant questions, even if they were not considered in the protocol. I also modified they way some questions were written because I realized the questions were not clear for the participants. Having a notion of the common themes also helped identified the point of saturation, as I kept hearing similar answers again and again.

Ethical considerations. Qualitative research is of intrusive nature (Hewitt, 2007). Therefore, researchers need to take into consideration the ethical implications of asking and sharing information about participants' experiences and behaviors. Gillemin and Gillam (2004) proposed two dimensions of ethics in qualitative research: *procedural ethics*, which involves seeking approval from an ethics committee, and *ethics in practice* or the everyday ethical issues that arise along the research process (p. 263). To address the *procedural ethics* portion of this study, I requested approval from Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research with human subjects.

To address the *ethics in practice* concerns, several steps were taken. First, I made my identity clear to my participants. Hewitt (2007) noted that "the identity of the researcher is of key importance because the researcher is actively involved in the social construction of the research reality" (p. 1150). In presenting myself, I took into consideration some of the factors that have been recognized as influencing the relationship between the researcher and the participant: age, appearance, social class, culture, inequalities of knowledge and power, environment, and gender (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Richards & Emslie, 2000). I presented myself as a Latina who emigrated nine years ago from Colombia. Being aware of the differences between Mexican and Colombian dialect, I tried to use neutral words that were familiar to the participants. I shared with participants that I am a mother, noting that my daughter is not yet in grade school. I showed pictures of her to some of them, and this helped them feel more comfortable talking to me. I made clear that I had no experience dealing with the school system as a parent, but I

told the participants that I used to work for a local newspaper and that also made them trust me. It was obvious for most of the participants that I was more educated than them, but that did not make them uncomfortable. Some of them even acknowledged that they would like their children to be as educated as I am. In sharing the results of the study, I took into consideration the following principles as I write about "people's lives": Aiming for balance and accuracy, not neutrality; assuring that no harm comes to participants; giving public voice to findings by sharing participant' own voices; and describing the context of your interactions; and disclosing my role (Ulin, Robinson & Tolley, 2004).

Reflexive notes. Reflexivity can be defined as "thoughtful, conscious self-awareness" (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). Hill, Lee, and Jennaway (2010) suggested that reflexivity "allows a more open exploration of the impact of the personal perspectives of the researchers and their relationships" (p. 322). Moreover, Finlay (2002) claimed that "reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself" (p. 532). I believe these calls for self-reflection are valid, especially after conducting the interviews and realizing that learning about other parents' routines, challenges, and concerns affected my perception of the education system and Hispanic parents themselves. This study not only changed my perceptions of others, but it also changed my perceptions about myself as a mother. I realized that many of these women quit their jobs to take of their children, but even then it was tough for them to participate in their children's education. This made me think that in the future, when my child is ready to go to school I need to be very involved for her to succeed. I may even need to stop working or work part time. I also felt very fortunate for having the opportunity of education, for knowing two languages and being able to find resources that help me raise my daughter and give her the best education possible.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research findings. I will give a general overview of the data. Following this overview, I will relate these findings to each of the research questions.

Overview

The data revealed that education was extremely important for Mexican and Mexican-American mothers. All of the participants expressed their desires of giving the best education possible to their children and seeing them completing a college degree. Participants admitted that for them education was measured not only by academic achievements, but also in terms of values and principles. For them, it was important that their children graduated from high school and college and that they were respectful and well-behaved. Most research participants also noted that education was the key for their children to have a better life than their parents, with less struggles, and a more stable job. However, no matter how important education was for them, many of the participants did not actively seek information about this issue.

Participants' main concerns in regards to their children education varied across the sample. For some of them the concern was that they were not going to be able to provide financial support to their children once they reached college. For others, high school dropouts were top of the list. Others mentioned concerns around immigration status and what this may imply to children born in Mexico who want to go to college here. Finally, others suggested they were worried they could not help their children succeed due to their low education attainment and their lack of knowledge of the English language.

For most of the participants, parental involvement and participation was very important. Most of them recognized the benefits of being involved in their children's education and schools, but only a few of them were fully involved. The majority of research participants helped their children with homework

to some extent, but not many of them participated in school activities or volunteered at schools. Moreover, most of the mothers acknowledged they did not communicate frequently with teachers or school staff, citing language as a big barrier to establish a relationship with them. Other barriers to parental involvement mentioned by participants were lack of time, mainly because of long work hours, and lack of childcare for younger children.

Research participants found the United States' education system very appealing. They described it as a system that offered more opportunities to children than the Mexican system and emphasized on its quality and benefits, like free lunches, access to technology, and other resources. Participants did not compare the two systems in terms of how they functioned and did not mention any differences that would not allow them to navigate the local system. Most of the participants' children were born in this country, so they had not dealt with the Mexican system other than what they had to when they went to school.

Participants also discussed the importance that interpreters have for them. Most of them rely on school interpreters to communicate with teachers and administrators, and they appreciate the fact that they are offered such help. Nonetheless, they recognized that they need to learn English to improve their relationship with schools, but only a few had taken any steps in that direction.

I will now provide particular findings related to my three research questions.

RQ1. How do Mexican and Mexican-American parents make meaning of their children's education?

Participants saw education as the key to a better future for their children. Mothers described education as a way of learning not only concepts and theories, but also, and most importantly, values and good manners. Regardless of their own education levels, these mothers demonstrated that education was of great value for them and suggested that they wanted their children to attain higher education, while being respectful and responsible. One mother said:

> Well, I think education is the base for everything. Eh, is to grow as a person, as an individual, right? Eh, I think it's the key for everything; education for a better future, to grow as, as a professional, whatever he wants to be. I'm still not sure about what he wants to be, what, right now he wants to be a policeman, he wants to be a firefighter, he wants to be… we still don't know.

Karla, mother of a seven-year old, gave her definition of someone who is educated: "Ah, like someone that, someone who has been educated, who has good principles, has good values, and, ah, has no ignorance, who has received basic knowledge of what's most necessary." For another participant, general knowledge was not as important as values when defining education. This is what she wanted for her son: "That he has good manners, that he treats people right, that he is not rude, and that he always respect adults."

Most of the participants said they saw education as the best way for their children to have a better life than what they have. They were very emphatic on expressing that they wanted their children to be "someone," and to find a job that brought them security without going through all the hardships they have been through. As one of the participants stated: "I dream with them studying, making it, studying to become someone in life so they can work in something better than us. Those are my hopes for them." Marta, mother of a second grader also shared her dreams.

> I think it is important for him to study, because if he has a higher education, and studies a lot, he wouldn't have to go through, eh, how do I tell you, the same… the same things we have been through because we don't have enough study. And if he, for example, gets a career, I think he won't have to struggle as much as we're struggling now. He won't have to do heavy jobs as many have to because we don't have enough education.

As they talked about their children attending college, participants did not note any differences on their expectations for their sons or daughters. Mothers of girls said they wished their daughters to become

doctors, as well as mothers of boys expressed their desire of their sons becoming highly regarded professionals.

Besides understanding the perception that participants had about education, this research question also helped me identify the three main variables of the situational theory of publics and how they were related to the problem of parental involvement among Mexican parents. Below I reveal the findings related to this variables, as well as what I found in relationship to the fourth variable of the situational theory of publics, the referent criterion.

Problem recognition. Among participants, there were different levels of involvement, raging from very involved to not involved at all. All participants acknowledged their own level of involvement and barriers to participate, but they were more outspoken when they were asked about parental involvement among Mexicans as a group. For instance, when asked about her involvement in her children's schools, one participant said she thought it was important to be involved, but she did not participate in any way. "Mainly because, like I said before, eh, well, I work and, well, my husband also works, and I, I cannot make it. I feel I don't have enough time." However, when I asked her if she thought if Mexican parents in general were involved, she suggested that most of them were not very involved because they did not care about their children.

> Sometimes there are so many kids. They call us (parents), and not all of us come. So many kids for 20 or 15 parents! (Laughed) It means that they are not worried about their children, they just have children, and send them to school and see what happens.

Jennifer, a mother of two, who was part of her daughter's school Parent Teacher Association and considered she had an excellent relationship with her daughter's teacher, explained why parental involvement was very important for her.

> It is a very important part for children. If they see, the kids, they see their parents are at their school, they see their parents, they feel more motivated to try harder. More so when they are

> teenagers, which is a difficult stage, I feel one has to be much more involved in their development.

In regards to parental involvement among Mexicans, this is what she had to say:

> Ah, I feel that there's an enormous lack of education because unfortunately, well, people who come from Mexico, for the most part, I don't mean everybody, but the majority, unfortunately have not even finished elementary school. So for them, no, it's not like their priority to be involved in education, but to work, that's what they're here for.

Jennifer expressed that the school her daughter attends offers different opportunities for parents to get involved, as well as free English classes for non-English speakers. However, according to her, few parents took advantage of these lessons, reinforcing her idea that Mexican parents are not interested in getting involved in schools.

One participant explained that she and her husband volunteered at her daughter's school because it was a condition of a contract they signed with the school at the beginning of the year. They were required to volunteer nine hours per semester, but, according to her, at the end most of the parents, including her, spent more time volunteering because they felt good about doing something for the school. However, she recognized that other Mexican parents were not as involved. She said: "I have a friend, that she says, 'why would I go if I don't understand anything' (in English). But you can really go. There's always someone who can tell you (translate)."

All participants recognized the need of improving their communication with teachers and schools. They all were aware of their own limitations and in general thought that they had the responsibility of building better relationships and getting more involved, given that schools were already committed. Many of the mothers mentioned they were planning on getting more involved this year, while others stated that they were either taking English classes or planning on taking them, in order to have better communication with the teachers. For example, when asked about how the teachers could im-

prove their communication with her, Cecilia, a mother of two girls in elementary and middle school answered: “I see that everything they do is fine, and I, I feel ashamed because I know I’m in their country and I know that I have to speak English here.” However, Cecilia contradicted herself later when she said she would expect the schools to have more Spanish-speaking staff for Mexican parents to feel more welcomed. She also added that she had tried to learn English before, but she was not satisfied with the outcome of the first months of class and she quit.

The findings suggested that Mexican parents were aware of their low parental involvement. They also recognized that there were certain barriers, perceived or real, that hampered their participation.

Constraint recognition. Participants were well aware of perceived and actual barriers to parental involvement and effective communication with teachers and schools. Most of the mothers recognized work as the most frequent barrier that impeded them, and others get involved in their children’s schools. Other barriers included language, which hindered involvement, as well as good communication with schools, and lack of childcare that prevented mothers from attending school functions or volunteering for activities during the day.

Most participants viewed work as the main barrier for parental involvement when they talked about Mexicans in general. The below quote was an example of this perception.

> Here, especially Mexicans, and I’m going to say especially Mexicans, it’s like we come here and we’re like mules. We only focus on our jobs and we neglect our children. Mexicans are only dedicated to work, work, work, and their children… they just get home, eat, go to sleep, and tomorrow, God will say.

This quote came from a mother who despite having a job, stated that she did not participate in her children’s schools mainly because she did not speak English. However, she explained that she had a job that allowed her to be home when her daughters came home from school, because it was very important for

her to share time with them during the day. Another participant, who was very involved in her son's school, also considered that work was the main barrier for parents who were not involved.

> Ah, maybe because many (parents) work and oftentimes they don't have the time. We know that most of the time it is very difficult that if you work in the morning, it is very difficult that you make some time to come to school, and, well, see how your child is doing.

For Tina, a stay-at-home mother, spending too much time at work was also the reason for low parental involvement among Mexicans. According to her: "The majority of parents, both dads and moms, work. And then they come home to cook, to do their household chores, and then they only have time to sign papers that they don't even know what they say." Another participant who volunteers not only at her son's school, but also at other neighboring schools, even suggested that work was just an excuse, and criticized some parents' lack of participation: "There are many who have to work, but, eh, many, many people don't work and hey don't like going to school to help, they don't like to be related to their children's education."

Other participants recognized work as their own barrier to school involvement. For them it is hard to find the balance between doing their job and supporting their children. It is important to note that many of the research participants changed their tone and seemed less critical when they talked about work as their own hurdle to be more involved. They tend to talk in plural (i.e., "we come here to work" vs. "they [Mexicans] come here to work").

> Rosa: Well, I think that because sometimes one has to work so much, I think that sometimes you don't have the time (to get involved in schools). I think that's the main reason. I mean, I think that's it.
>
> Researcher: So, that's one of your limitations, that you don't have enough time?
>
> Yes, because if you're not at work they can take it away from you. So, you have to be at work, and your work is very important too.

Rosa, who has four kids, also shared her struggle to find balance between work and family: “Well, I have said it, my job is very important, but my children are very important too, and sometimes I’ve had problems at work, because I want to be with my children, so, it’s hard.” For Laura, mother of two girls, it was also hard to get involved and help her daughters with homework because she worked in the afternoons. “More than anything, sincerely, one is sometimes more concerned about work (…) I know that one has to work, right? One has to work, but one also has to be on top of their children.” However, she contradicted herself because when asked why she was not involved in school she replied that it was because “I haven’t taken the time to check out, come to see how can I help.”

The second biggest hurdle that impeded parental involvement and communication with schools, according to participants, was the lack of knowledge of the English language. For most of the participants this was perceived as a personal and a group barrier. Cecilia explained why she is not involved: “Because I cannot talk. (Laughed) And then, they are talking like bla, bla, bla, bla, and I think… what if they ask me something? How I’m I going to talk to them? But I would love to participate.” Nonetheless, another participant who does not speak English admitted that this was not a barrier for her at all. She mentioned that she was very involved in her son’s school, and when she had problems with the language, she requested help from interpreters or tried her best to understand.

One participant who is taking English lessons mentioned that many parents did not attend conferences or meetings at school because they said “they (at school) speak English and nobody is going to understand me.” Another participant also suggested that English was a barrier for many parents. “Well, there are many that do not participate because they don’t speak English. But unfortunately, the conferences, and everything, we have interpreters and not everything is in English.”

Many mothers expressed that not knowing English was a barrier to effective communication between them and teachers and schools. In most of the cases they acknowledged that interpreters played an important role by helping them translate during parent-teacher conferences or occasional visits to

the school. However, it was difficult for them to understand messages from teachers or administrators that came only in English. For instance, Flor, a mother of three, found it very hard to understand messages left by county administrators.

> You see, sometimes you don't understand, but they leave us messages, and then my daughter translates them later. Sometimes you doubt if it's right, because you see that these girls sometimes they don't tell you, don't tell you the truth. Mostly, for the older one, they always call and talk in English. And sometimes that they call from the county, and they leave us messages. But my husband understands a little bit.

Some of the participants expressed that it was difficult for them to participate because they had young children and they did not have anyone who could take care of them if they had to go to their other children's school. Another barrier cited by two participants, who both have college degrees, was the low level of education attainment that many Mexicans have.

> Many of them didn't finish their own school. So they might have just gone to fourth grade, and that was it, and they don't show just the same interest for the kids here that they have for education. They're not participating, and some of them are illiterate, so they can't help their kids. So, I mean, I now it's hard for them too… But then, some of them just don't give a s… You know, a hoot about it! (Laughed) But then you have the ones that do. That do try because they know that in order to make it here you've got to have an education.

Level of involvement. Level of involvement was assessed in different ways. First, participants discussed how they were involved in their children's education on a day-to-day basis, helping them with homework and motivating them to do well in school. Most of them admitted that helping their children with homework was part of their routine. A big portion of the sample was able to do it because they were either stay-at-home mothers or had flexible schedules at work. Participants explained that doing homework was customary, and were aware of the importance of helping their children. One participant

described why she helped her son with homework every day: “If I don’t help him, who does? If I don’t help him, who does? So I think it is important because maybe this way I also learn more and I help him understand the things he sometimes doesn’t understand.”

Even though they wanted to be involved in their children’s education, for some participants there were barriers that made it difficult to participate. Language was the main reason why these mothers felt they could not help their children. As Karla said: “Kids always have questions and maybe I can’t explain it to her in her language, but I already went through that, so I can explain it in Spanish. And many times I’m able to answer her questions.”

Participants usually overcome this language barrier by looking up words in the dictionary, using the Internet, or asking a friend or relative for translation. Participants who had good communication with teachers expressed that most of the times they asked teachers for help when they did not understand something, while others went to neighbors or older children looking for assistance. It is important to note that as children grew older, mothers did not helped them as much with homework and limited their involvement to asking their children if they had finished homework. Furthermore, several participants delegated the task of helping younger children with homework to older siblings, reducing slightly their involvement.

Another way participants were involved in their children’s education was by encouraging them to stay at school, work hard, and think about their future. They saw this as part of their role in their children’s education alongside with teachings about values, respect and good manners. As Jennifer stated: ”The role I feel I have is to be behind them, in this case (daughter’s name), checking if she’s doing her homework, encouraging her, motivating her to do other things and to practice what she has learned at school.”

These findings revealed that Mexican and Mexican-American parents had medium to high level of involvement when we referred to helping their children with homework and motivating them to fin-

ish school. However, level of involvement was lower when assessed in terms of participation in schools and volunteering. Most of the participants admitted that they were not involved in their children's schools and they did not communicate frequently with teachers and school staff. Many of them, however stated that they were either willing to get involved or had the intention to participate soon. For instance, one of the participants stated that she had not been involved in his oldest child school because she had two younger children and she could not leave them to go to school to volunteer or help out. However, she mentioned that this year her goal was to get more involved because she found a place to leave her youngest son. For other participants the biggest impediment to participate was work, while others cited language as a barrier.

Nevertheless, most participants recognized the importance of parental involvement. The mother of a seven-year old who is very involved in her son's school shared a story about how her involvement was key to solve a problem her son was facing:

> For example, at the beginning of the year, my son was a victim of bullying, so, eh, if I wouldn't have been involved, I wouldn't have known because usually the boys who are victims of bullying don't talk, they don't say anything. And I was here, and somebody told me. Another boy. So, if I weren't involved, my son would be, eh, in the same situation as before.

Although she was not involved in her children's school, another of the participants acknowledged the importance of parental involvement and explained why it is significant for her: "I feel it is very important that parents get involved, because otherwise our children, can you imagine how they would be, lonely, doing whatever they want." This participant expressed her desire of getting involved this year and recalled a previous experience when she tried to get involved but was unsuccessful: "When my daughter went to pre-k, well, I came here and wanted to participate in her classroom, but the teacher said that because my daughter was so close to me, well, I couldn't come. So I didn't."

In terms of communication with teachers and school, participants had different levels of involvement. Some had good communication with the school, to the point of talking to teachers or staff members during weekends or sending them text messages to ask them about homework or other school related issues. This is what one of the participants had to say about how frequently she communicated with her son's teacher: "Well, at least two times a week we're texting, or, eh, for example, if for any reason my son misses school, eh, the teacher sends me by email his assignments… Eh, yes, we're constantly communicating." Nonetheless, many of the research participants had poor communication with schools. The below quote from one of the participants reflects low level of involvement. I asked this participant what was her relationship with her children's teachers and she replied:

> Well, because I had to register him after the deadline I didn't meet the teacher, but I want to go and meet her because I'm interested in knowing everything, meeting her, see how's everything and for her to meet me as well.

Several participants expressed that they only communicated with teachers when they were summoned to parent-teacher conferences or when there was a problem with their children. Cecilia remembered how last year her youngest daughter's grades were going down and she was called to a special meeting. She was very satisfied with the outcome; her daughters' grades went up again, and they found a method that helped her learn better. However, she did not follow up with teachers, neither she used this opportunity to build a relationship with the teachers. According to her, she was too embarrassed to talk to teachers because she does not speak English. On the other hand, Flor said she reached out to her son's teacher but did not hear from her for over a month. I could tell she was hesitant to answer questions about her son's teacher, and her face expressions changed when I asked about her relationship with her.

> (Silence). Well, the youngest one has had until now… (Laughed) Like a month ago I requested a meeting here but I have not heard from them (laughed). But, from kindergarten, my son, good,

> a very good teacher. Yes, she taught well. It was not until this year, he's in second grade, and with his current teacher, I requested a meeting to talk with her, but I have not heard back.

Referent criterion. Since all but one of the participants were born in Mexico, almost all of them had the Mexican education system and values as a reference to talk about education. Most of them liked more the American education system because it offered more opportunities to their children, but yearned for the type of education they received at their homes in Mexico. For example, this participant shared her view of education.

> The type of education I want for him is that he is a boy like, hmmm… In the sense that he should be very respectful, that he would be almost like, like in our country, that you can never be disrespectful to your parents. And what children have here, like, in schools, is that you touch them, even if you spank them only once, that's enough, they summon you to the school, right? And what I would like is that my son, that he would get the concept from Hispanics, that he will not follow what is done here. You know what I mean?

Some participants expressed that it was a challenge for them to raise their children here because they were used to a more conservative society and had trouble dealing with the culture their children were being exposed to. For example, one mother said:

> Here, this is a country with liberty of expression, it's a country where you can do whatever you want, and nobody will tell you anything. Any thing, even though you see bad things happening here and there, back home we are more shy, so, you know people better there because here it is harder to get to know people and it's even more difficult when you don't know the language a hundred percent.

Another mother also mentioned some difference between the two cultures:

> The difference is that back home, in our country, it's not as liberal as it is here. Here it's very liberal, when kids are 16, 18-years old they make them independent, and back home it's different.

> Back there you have to study, and study, and study. The more you study, the better person you are.

One theme that was recurrent was that in Mexico all students used uniforms, while here only few public schools require uniforms. This was upsetting for some of the parents, who mentioned that uniforms were very important to them, as they serve as a way of promoting discipline and good manners. Below are some thoughts from a participant regarding uniforms.

> Well, it is important that children from all schools have uniforms. A uniform, like it's customary in Mexico, because at some schools, boys have earrings, they have their hair dyed. Girls have long nails, they have their hair dyed, they use mini skirts… and in Mexico it's not that way. In Mexico you could not go to school with a mini skirt or with the hair dyed, they would kick you out of school.

Karla also mentioned uniforms as a symbol of order and good behavior.

> Even in middle school, high school, in Mexico they use uniforms. And here it's different. They even use flip flops, the boys wear their pants on their hips, and I think, that doesn't look good in a boy that's going to school, you don't see any future for them. A boy like that or a girl with a lot of makeup or long nails, you don't see any future.

Participants also saw differences in the way they, as Mexicans, feel about education in comparison to Americans. Even though all of them expressed that they wanted their children to go to college, when they were asked about the difference in opinions about educations between Mexicans and Americans, most of them said that Mexicans did not care as much as Americans about college and education. One of the mothers said: "Most of them (Mexicans) think that it's enough if their children graduate from high school. Most of the Americans say, they should graduate from college. I think that's the main difference I've seen." The quote below is from another participant who shared the same impression.

> I think that Americans clearly know that that's the goal, right? To go to college. Hispanics not. Many Hispanics, I feel that… their goal is, eh, that their children learns English so he can get a better job and we can gather money to build a house in Mexico and then go back. That's people's mentality.

Another example of how one participant perceived a difference between the two cultures:

> I think that us Mexicans do not give education a lot of importance, it's like we are okay with whatever they are able to learn, up to when they want to study. Many say, "it's enough if you finish elementary school or wherever you want to finish". But I see that Americans are different. They support their children until they graduate and they go to college to get a degree.

RQ2. What type of publics are Mexican and Mexican-American parents according to the situational theory of publics?

Mexican and Mexican-American parents were a mix of aware and latent publics. Participants had medium to high levels of involvement, high levels of problem recognition, and high levels of constraint recognition. In most cases participants were not actively seeking information, and rarely shared information about education issues. Several participants acknowledged that all information they received regarding education came from their children's schools, and was more related to meetings, notifications, and other day-to-day matters. Some of the research participants received information from mass media (an example of information processing, or passive absorption of information), and some of them used the Internet to search for specific information, for example, when they were helping their children with homework (an example of information seeking, or deliberate, active communication behavior). A few participants shared information with relatives, friends, and neighbors, in particular those who were involved in their children's school. For instance, one participant shared how she has become a point of reference in her community:

> Ah, I, when I receive information, I try to share it with the neighbors that I know from the apartment complex. Because many of them can't come, so the can't come, either because they work, or… and then, they even look for me and (ask me) "What have they done at school?" "What's going on at the school?" So yes, I try to share it with others.

This participant exhibited a behavior that exemplifies information seeking. However, this was more the exception than the rule because this participant was very involved in her son's school, volunteering, taking English lessons offered by the school, and participating on a weekly program offered by a local organization to educate parents on different issues.

Aware public. Some participants were considered aware publics because they showed high problem recognition and involvement, and high levels of constraint recognition. For instance, one mother acknowledged that she knew that she needed to be involved and even tried to attend school when she was free. However, her work schedule limited her ability to participate. Moreover, she identified a problem in her community, where parents were not very involved in local schools: "But unfortunately here in this community where we live, parents, we don't participate a lot. You go to conferences and it's always the same people, just a few of us." She explained how she tried to participate, but oftentimes her job impeded her involvement:

> When I'm, when I don't work a lot, I always go, always attend meetings. I try to go as much as I can to the school, and if there's a, an event and all those things, if I can help, be there, that's why I try to do when I can, because when you're working it's hard.

Another participant, a mother of six, was also a good example of how aware publics behave. She had high level of involvement and problem recognition, as she recognized that it was important for her to be involved in her children's education. She did not work and supported her children in different ways, like taking them to the library, helping them with homework, and making sure they had access to extracurricular activities. However, she showed high levels of constraint recognition, as she was not in-

volved in her children's schools because she did not have access to child care for her baby: "Oh! At the beginning I wanted to go, right? Participate. But then, I had my baby and now I don't have time to, to go. I go to meetings and everything, but I don't participate." Nonetheless, she explained that she frequently goes to her son's schools to have lunch with him, an activity that some participants also enjoyed.

Latent public. Latent publics have low problem recognition and medium to high levels of involvement. They can also have high levels of constraint recognition. Laura, for example acknowledged that she was not able to participate in her daughters' schools or help them with homework because she worked. Her responses to questions about parental involvement were contradictory. She said, for example, that she had not participated in schools because she hadn't had the drive to find how she could help or get involved. But later she mentioned a desire for getting more involved.

> But, I kind of say, no, I have to, I have to learn a little bit, eh, study English too, well, I don't mean I'll do it tomorrow, right? But I will learn and I'm going to get more involved in my older girl's school. The younger one, well, she's younger, but the older one needs me more. I said, I'll be there, and that's why… And I think it's all right. They are protected.

This participant also demonstrated medium level of involvement and low problem recognition when she talked about her communication with teachers.

> Researcher: So, how often do you communicate with the teachers?
>
> Laura: Well, so far I haven't talked to them, but I'll try to see, to talk to them to see how she's doing.
>
> Research: Okay. And would you change the way they communicate with you?
>
> Laura: Well, I say that, right now, no. I mean, for me, for me, I think that when teachers sometimes do not send you notes or anything it's because, I think are children are well behaved. Because up until now, they have not sent me a note, or have called me (to tell me) "you know what, your daughter skipped class." So far, nothing.

This mother assumed that everything was good and she did not need to communicate with the teacher because she had not heard from the school. With her behavior she also demonstrated low levels of information seeking, as she was not actively communicating her daughters' teachers or asking them questions regarding their academic progress. Instead, she waited for something "bad" to happen to communicate with the teachers.

Other participants also showed low to medium levels of involvement, problem recognition, and information seeking, when they recognized that they did not communicate with teachers unless there were summoned to parent teacher conferences or were contacted with specific requests. Such is the case of one of the mothers who answered the following when asked about how frequently she communicated with her son's teacher: "(I) only (communicate) when they send the paper that says that there's a conference. When the teacher… That's when I go."

Some participants may have low levels of involvement and behave like latent publics because of past experiences with the school. For instance, one participant said she felt discouraged because when she tried to communicate with the teachers they told her that they were too busy, and she should wait until the parent teacher conference if she wanted to ask something. However, she acknowledged that she rarely attended school activities and mentioned that she had not met her son's teachers because she registered him after the school enrollment deadline was over.

RQ3. How can schools better engage Mexican and Mexican-American parents?

Findings revealed how parents viewed their relationships with their children's schools and showed the dynamics of the relational approach in an educational setting. Research participants answered questions aimed at evaluating the four indicators of relationship, trust, control mutuality, relational satisfaction, and relational commitment.

Trust. Most participants said they trusted their children's schools and teachers. Several mothers even gave examples of situations in which schools demonstrated that they could be trusted.

> The other day they said that the kid that had good grades on an exam, or something like that, would get a pass to be free of homework for one day. And they could use it the day they wanted. And they fulfilled their promise; they gave it to him!

Moreover, this participant also shared other instances that made her trust the school. “They are always trying to innovate. The school, they try to fix it so the kids see something different and beautiful. And they give them, they made available a lot of materials to make children more interested.” When asked about why she was confident that her child’s school was going to improve, another participant said:

> Participant: Because, because this school is putting in place new projects that I haven’t seen in other schools.
>
> Researcher: Okay. What kind of projects?
>
> Participant: Like projects that they will bring a music program for kids in fourth and fifth grade, they’re going to teach them music, and so on. I know that we’re going to pay for that, but, eh, it’s a, they’re going to teach them a lot of things, teachers are going to give them two hours of music… That’s what I like from the school.

Another participant explained why she trusted his son’s school: “One of their goals was to implement uniforms and they’re doing it. So, many kids don’t bring their uniform and they are being punished. They haven’t told us what kind of punishment, but they get punished.” No participants said they did not trust their children’s schools. Some of them were critical of certain aspects of the schools, but they all agreed that they could trust the schools.

Control mutuality. Findings suggested that in most relationships parent-school, power relied almost entirely on the schools. Participants stated that they rarely expressed frustration or voiced their needs. For most of them everything was always right, and they measured the quality of the relationship in terms of how good their children were doing in school and not how they related to teachers or school

staff. Some parents tried to level power in the relationship, like one participant who was upset about the cancellation of the Girl Scouts program at her daughter's school.

> For example, right know I'm checking on the Girl Scouts issue that I talked to you about before, that I don't know why they cancelled it. I talked about it with the principal and we agreed that we were going to talk about it again. Ah, that's something that I won't let go. Until we don't get the program back, because I think it's very good for the kids. Boys and girls.

Most of the participants were not aware of the power they could exert in the schools by participating in certain activities and organizations such as the local Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). One of the mothers expressed indifference regarding this issue.

> I think that the next day after school starts they convey a meeting, and they choose members or something like that, I don't know. The truth is that I don't attend those meetings. Because I say "why?" And the truth is that I'm out.

Another of the participants was aware of the benefits of being part of the PTA, but expressed her disappointment because she was not allowed to participate in the organization.

> Eh, I was very interested in participating on the PTA, but they left me out. But, however, I'm still involved, eh, well, I don't need a position to collaborate, eh, but, when you're interested, no, eh, it's like you feel that they stop you…

Only one of the participants, Jennifer, was part of her daughter's school PTA. Her perspective was different from others because she really understood the purpose of the organization and how it helped parents and schools.

> For example, in my case, I'm a little bit involved, not a 100 percent, but I'm part of the board of the PTA, that's how they call it, and that has given me a perspective, a broader vision of how you can get involved in the school to help either as a volunteer, attending English lessons, during an event, all that… it's good for both parties, isn't it?

Relational satisfaction. Most parents said they were satisfied with the relationship they had with schools, but they were not able to elaborate why they felt that way. Their responses were more oriented to express why they liked the school or what had the school done for their children. For instance, one of the participants explained way she was satisfied with her relationship with the school: "Because they are very interested in the kids, in their education, in their discipline, if they see them with their shoelaces untied, they asked them to tie them up. Anything they see that's wrong, they correct it." Another woman expressed her satisfaction in terms of how she felt the school was treating her and her son: "So far nobody has treated me wrong and everyone has been very nice and… they have never treated my son wrong either." One of the participants talked about her level of satisfaction in the relationship by comparing her son's current school to the previous school: "I like it (the current school) because my son has improved more in this school than in the previous one."

Some participants did mention situations where they felt their needs were not met or they did not receive the outcome they were expecting. For instance one mother mentioned how she complained several times about an incident that allegedly happened in the classroom and did not receive a satisfactory answer from the teacher. Another participant recalled a situation where some parents did not agree with having the door for trailer classrooms open during the day, but even after meetings and discussions, the situation remained the same. A couple of participants also shared their concerns regarding the lack of extra curricular activities offered by the schools. Despite all these disagreements, participants stated that they were satisfied with their relationships with the schools.

Relational commitment. All participants mentioned in some way that they wanted to improve their relationship with the school and even thought of things they could do to make it better. Some of them said they would start taking English lessons to better communicate with teachers and staff. Others said they would like to be more involved and that they would find ways of beat the obstacles that refrained

them from participating. Moreover, several of the participants said they would like to communicate more often with the teachers.

Most of the participants perceived that the schools were committed to build stronger relationships as well. One of the participants, for instance, elaborated on what she had seen that demonstrated to her that the school wanted to improve relationships with parents.

> Participant: The school is committed. They have, several, activities, because they have the parents' center, and the parents' center is very helpful because it helps us participate, but as I told you before, sometimes we, we don't participate or don't see it as important, but there are things that tell us that it is important.
>
> Researcher: Hm. So they are doing things, they have taken steps and they have things to help and motivate the parents?
>
> Participant: Yes, yes. Eh, in the parents' center they have a library where you can go and take out books that my help you in case you don't understand. And in case you don't understand, you have the parents' center, where you can go and they support you.

Participants valued the efforts that the schools are making to improve the relationship with the parents. However, they acknowledged that parents still needed to do their part. For instance, one participant explained that she thought the school was doing a good job at encouraging parents: "I think they are making an effort to do it (motivate parents). I think they are making an effort, but I think that in order to have a better relationship, there should be interest from both parties." Another participant noticed a change in the school's efforts to motivate parents.

> This year I've seen that a lot. Because since the first meetings that we had, when the kids started school, the principal, the interpreters, every one, I mean, they have tried to motivate parents to participate more in the school. And I think that's something that we hadn't seen before in this school.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to explore how Hispanic parents make meaning of their children's education in light of the situational theory of publics. To achieve this goal, I conducted interviews with 17 Mexican mothers, who talked to me about their perceptions of education, their involvement in their children's schools, and their relationships with the schools. This study also aimed at making recommendations for schools on the best way to engage Hispanic parents and get them more involved.

In this section I will discuss the findings and relate them to the public relations' theories I reviewed. I will also state the limitations of this research, and suggest future lines of research. Finally, I will give some practical recommendations to schools that would like to use the situational theory of publics and the relational approach to manage their relationships with parents and better communicate with them. The final goal is that schools use the findings of this research to design strategies that can motivate parental involvement and in turn improve the academic outcomes of children of Mexican and Mexican-American parents.

Theoretical Connections to Research Findings

The situational theory of publics was the theoretical framework that guided this work. All of the women who participated in this research recognized that for Mexican and Mexican-American parents it was hard to be involved in their children's schools and education. Some of them admitted they had a problem themselves while others suggested that the problem was exclusive to other families. Regardless of whose problem it was, they all identified possible barriers to this lack of involvement. All participants showed some level of involvement regarding the problem of parental participation. They felt a connection with the issue and identified different things they could do to get more involved, whether it was at home, helping their kids with homework, communicating better with teachers, or volunteering at

school. This research also examined relationships between parents and schools and it found that such relationships were not symmetrical and mutually beneficial, like the relational approach in public relations suggests should be.

In this section, I will first discuss the findings in light of the different variables of the situational theory of publics. Second, I will elaborate on the type of publics Mexican and Mexican parents are. Finally, I will discuss findings associated to the relational approach.

Problem recognition. Problem recognition was high among research participants. Most of them identified a problem with parental involvement among Mexican parents and recognized that as individuals and as a group they had to do something about this issue. Findings confirmed results of a previous study that revealed that Hispanic parents wanted their children to be educated, obtain jobs and experiment happiness in their lives (Dyer, 2009). Most of my research participants expressed the importance of education for them and recognized it as the key to a better future for their children. According Dyer's survey, the main barriers to achieve these dreams were parents' lack of knowledge of the English language, the need to further their own education, and their difficulties with managing time and money. Dyer's results were in line with my thesis' findings that showed that parents had major concerns about Mexican and Mexican-American parents being unable to support their children's education because they had to work, and their lack of understanding of the English language. My research also confirmed findings by Hwang and Vrongstinos (2010) that suggested that most parents believed the best way of being involved in their children's learning process was helping them with homework. Most of my research participants acknowledged that they frequently assisted their children with homework and encouraged them to stay in school and continue their education.

Constraint recognition. Constraint recognition was high among all research participants, as they listed several barriers that impeded parental participation among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Findings suggested that the main barriers parents met to get involved in their children's education were

work, language, and lack of childcare. These results were in line with some previous findings. For example, Estrada-Martinez, et.al (2011) found that economic pressure and job instability interfered on Latino immigrant parents' ability to meet with teachers and stay with their children after school hours. De Gaetano (2007) suggested that one of the barriers to parental involvement among Hispanics was the lack of school staff who speak the parents' language. However, she listed mistrust of large bureaucracies, differences in parental expectations, and negative attitudes of school personnel, as constraints to parental involvement, but research participants did not recognize any of these as barriers to participation. Like some of the participants, Bohon, Macpherson, and Atiles (2005) addressed lack of childcare as a constraint to parental participation. Nonetheless, the authors suggested other barriers like transportation and cultural traditions that were not recognized by participants as constraints.

Other studies cited poverty and lack of understanding of the role that parents play in their children's education as barriers to parental involvement (Quiocho & Daoud, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Some research participants did express some hesitation when they described their role in their children's education, but did not recognize this as a barrier to their participation. Some mothers addressed the fact that they feared they would not be able to pay for quality education for their children in the future, but they did not mention poverty as a limitation to their involvement. On the contrary, they acknowledged the quality of resources available to their children, in comparison, for example, to those available in their country of origin. It is worth noting that none of these previous studies were conducted from a communications perspective.

Even though work was the main constraint participants identified, not all of them had a job. Many of them were stay-at-home mothers or worked part time, but had partners who worked full time. For most of them, however, this was not an impediment to get involved. Moreover, some of them were interviewed at schools in the morning hours, a fact that demonstrated that they could find the time to go to school and spend a couple of hours there. Some participants also mentioned they used to go to

have lunch with their children at school, and even complained that one of the schools had cancelled that activity. Schools could capitalize on the fact that mothers can indeed overcome some of their barriers and go to school to participate in certain activities. For instance, some of the mothers who were interviewed at a certain school were attending an education program offered by a local nonprofit. They went there every Wednesday from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. A Spanish-speaking woman facilitated this program, and it attracted around 20 to 30 mothers every week. I met another group of mothers at a different school's parent center. They were waiting for their English class to start, and in the meantime they used the computer or chatted with the women who managed the center. Two Spanish-speaking professionals staffed this parent center, and it seemed like there was a very welcoming environment. I observed camaraderie between mothers and center's staff, and during the interviews a couple of the participants mentioned that the parent center was a great resource when they had questions about the school or their children's homework. Furthermore, the coordinators of the center offer childcare and activities for young children while their mothers attended the English class. These two examples demonstrated that when mothers found someone they trusted and spoke their language at school, they were more likely to overcome barriers and visit the school more frequently.

These high levels of constraint recognition among participants indeed lead to low levels of information seeking and information processing, as suggested by Kim and Grunig (2011). Most of the participants acknowledged that they did not actively seek information about education or parental involvement. For most of them, information came from schools, and was strictly related to meetings, field trips, and other routine matters. Only few of them sought information and shared it with others. However, a few mothers emerged as sort of leaders or points of reference in their communities due to their active involvement and communications skills. Schools could try to identify these mothers who could serve as ambassadors or liaison between the schools and the community.

Level of involvement. Level of involvement is one of the most researched variables of the situational theory of publics, because it has been demonstrated that the higher the level of involvement, the more likely the public will analyze issues more frequently, and actively seek information about a problem (Aldoory, 2001). In this research, participants had in general medium to high levels of involvement. They tend to have higher levels of involvement in issues related to homework and motivation for their children, while lower levels were present on questions related to participation in schools and volunteering. As current and previous research revealed, Mexican parents are interested in their children's education and want to get more involved. However, constraint recognition levels are too high and parents find it difficult to overcome barriers to participation, especially language and work commitments. Communication efforts in school should aim at increasing level of involvement among Mexican and Mexican-American parents. If parents are educated about the value of parental involvement and strong relationships between them and schools, they may be more likely to engage in active communication behaviors.

Type of public. Findings of this study revealed that Mexican and Mexican-American mothers were a mix of aware and latent publics. Participants were considered aware publics because they had medium to high levels of involvement, high levels of problem recognition, and high levels of constraint recognition. In most cases participants were not actively seeking information, and rarely shared information about education issues. Some participants could also be considered latent publics because they had medium levels of involvement and low problem recognition. For this group constraint recognition was also high. Even though it could be challenging, schools should focus on trying to communicate actively with aware and latent publics. Communication is more likely to be effective with aware publics than active publics (Dozier and Ehling, 1992). Active publics may discard any communication from the organization because they are already obtaining information from other sources to reinforce attitudes already constructed (Dozier and Ehling, 1992). Aware publics, on the contrary, may be more open to

receive and even seek information from the organization and engage in more active communication behaviors. Latent publics are more challenging, because they hardly recognize a problem, but if guided and educated, they can move up to become aware publics. Schools could take advantage of the fact that most Mexican and Mexican-American parents are not active publics and create strategies to reach out to these parents.

Referent criterion and culture. In planning communication efforts to reach Mexican and Mexican-American parents, schools should take into consideration cultural cues and previous references from their target audience. Findings from my research revealed that Mexican mothers have very strong opinions about how differently children are raised in the United States and in Mexico. Participants considered themselves, and Mexicans in general, very conservative, while they thought Americans were more liberal. They referenced several times the way they were raised, emphasizing respect and good manners, and they expressed their desire of raising their children this way. However, they felt it was difficult to do so, amid different traditions and values. These findings confirm previous findings by Rueschenberg and Buriel (1989), who argued that although Mexican-American families become more involved in the dominant culture, family units retain the family structure, relationship, and interactions found in the country of origin. Moreover, these findings demonstrate the importance of taking into consideration families' previous experiences and cultural cues, in order to understand them and better engage them. Like all immigrants, Mexican families go through different levels of acculturation, and it would be useful to assess how acculturated they are, and how they can combine their expectations about their children's education with the school's principles and culture.

In trying to get Mexican and Mexican-American parents involved, it is also important to learn about their previous experiences with the school system in their country of origin. This research's participants did not make many references about their levels of involvement in schools in Mexico, mainly because in most of the cases their children were born here. However, an analysis about the current

situation of Mexican education by Alberto Cirigo (2010), suggested that there was a disconnect between parents and schools, with parents complaining without offering solutions, and not helping their children with homework or teaching them values at all. Schools should also consider focusing their communication efforts on mothers. This research confirmed previous findings that in Latino families mothers were usually the ones in charge of dealing with schools, helping their children with homework and educating their children (Bohon, Macpherson & Atiles, 2005).

Moreover, schools should consider the cultural baggage Mexican parents bring. They come from a collectivistic society and are now living in a culture where individualism is the norm (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995; Triandis, 1998). As previous research suggested, Mexicans value family, respect, and moral education over individualistic behaviors like competitiveness and excessive freedom (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). Also, it is beneficial for schools to remember that Mexicans have different parenting styles; when they immigrate, they find a more child-centered approached, where parents are not as authoritarian and tend more to negotiate and listen to children's needs.

Relational approach. Findings of this research suggested that relationships between Mexican and Mexican-American parents and schools are not totally symmetrical and mutually beneficial. In these relationships some elements of good relationships were present, like trust and relational satisfaction. Control mutuality was very low in that most of the participants did not recognize the power they had on the relationship and there did not seem to be an agreement between parents and schools in regards to relationship goals. Relational commitment was at a medium level, with parents wanting to continue in the relationship and willing to be more proactive, but not really knowing the best way to being more involved.

The relational approach is highly recommended to schools if they want to develop communication strategies aimed at reaching relationship goals. There needs to be a shift to the middle in terms of who benefits from the relationship. Right know parents are benefiting in that their children are receiving

an education and they feel they are being treated justly. Nonetheless, schools are not benefiting as much; parents are not very involved and they rarely express their needs and concerns. It would be interesting to know, though, if schools are taking the time to understand where are parents coming from and how they can align both parties' goals for the children's education. Another challenge lays on the fact that parents need to be empowered and schools have yet to find the best way to educate parents on how the system can help them achieve their goals while receiving their support.

Bruning and Ledingham (1999) stated that organizations should focus more on building, developing, and maintaining organization-public relations instead of manipulating public opinion. Schools, then, should concentrate their efforts on improving relationships, taking advantage from the perception among participants that they are open to encourage and include more parents. Title I schools could particularly benefit from this approach, considering that they have an obligation for building stronger relationships with parents and offering them significant opportunities to get involved in schools.

Dialogue is a key component of symmetrical relationships (Kent and Taylor, 2002). Not only it is the ideal way of building ethical and fulfilling relationships, but it is also a tool that favors interactive communication (Kent and Taylor, 1998). According to findings, most Mexican and Mexican-American parents are not involved in dialogic relationships with schools. These parents rarely express their needs or concerns to the schools and in many cases do not have lively interactions with school personnel. There are certain exceptions, like the relationship described between some mothers and the parent center coordinators in one of the schools I visited. This was a good example of a dialogic relationship, where both parts identified common goals and work together to reach the same objective (i.e. getting parents more involved). The coordinators of the center helped mothers not only with translations, but also with questions they had about the education system, parenting issues, resources, and homework. In turn, mothers trusted these women with the care of their younger children while they attended English classes and referred to them as a big support when they needed help with school related topics.

Findings also revealed that there is a challenge for dialogic relationships given that many parents do not speak English. Conversations are not fluid when the two parts do not speak the same language. Interpreters have demonstrated to be very effective, however, for some parents it is uncomfortable to have a third person in the middle of a discussion that may involve personal maters.

Limitations and future research

This study was limited to Mexican and Mexican-American mothers who lived in two of the counties with the largest Hispanic populations in Georgia. However, both counties, DeKalb and Gwinnett, are located in urban areas, where there are several resources available to Spanish speaking parents. To some extent, in these two counties there is a general understanding of Hispanic culture and there have been significant efforts to be more inclusive of this community, in particular in the school systems. It would be interesting to see, though, what would this same study find if conducted in more rural counties or areas where the Hispanic population is starting to boom.

Other suggestion for future research would be to conduct a similar study but from the point of view of the schools. Researchers could compare perceptions from both parents and schools and determine what they have in common and which are the main differences between both groups. It would also be appropriate to analyze communication efforts from schools and measure their effectiveness. Some questions to consider: Is it enough to translate the message? Are they targeting the right public? Are they taking into consideration cultural nuances?

Recommendations for schools

Along this chapter, I have already made some suggestions to schools that want to use the situational theory of publics and the relational approach as the base for communication strategies with Mexican and Mexican-American parents. In this section I will summarize these recommendations and elaborate some other points.

First, I would suggest school to define mothers as their target audience for messages and communication efforts aimed at Hispanic and, more particularly, Mexican families. My findings, as well previous studies, suggested that in most Latino families, mothers were the ones in charge of dealing with schools, helping their children with homework, and getting them ready to school. Many of the mothers do not work and are available during the day. Their main concern is that they do not speak English, but if they receive information in Spanish or find a person that speaks Spanish at school, they are more likely to get involved and participate in different activities. This does not mean that fathers should left apart, but communication with mothers should be a priority. When talking to them it would be useful to appeal to their ideas about raising their kids and focus on the importance they give to values and good manners.

Another recommendation would be to take advantage of situations where parents are already at school. For instance, several research participants mentioned that they enjoyed going to school to have lunch with their children. Once mothers or fathers are there, school administrators or teachers could ask them to stay a little longer and give them short talks about important issues, or take a moment to talk to them and get to know them better. This could also be a good time to let them know that there are different tasks that they can help the school with. During these interactions there should be at least one person who speaks Spanish, so parents feel more comfortable.

I would also suggest that schools establish, along with parents, goals for their relationship. Many parents do not realize that they need to build and maintain a relationship with the school or the teachers. They simply respond to requests, like meeting notifications. But they assume that as long as their children are doing well at school, their presence or participation is not required.

Finally, I would recommend to school staff that they identify one or two mothers who have a leadership role in the community. They can help the school spread the word about activities and serve as a role model for others who are not as involved. While conducting interviews for this study I was able

to find at least four women who could take this role. When information or invitations come from someone who has similar background and ways of life, Mexican mother are more likely to respond positively. It would just be a matter of finding key players in the community and giving them a small training so they can serve as ambassadors of the school.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine how Mexican and Mexican-American parents made meaning of their children's education in light of the situational theory of publics. This research also explored how parents viewed their relationships with their children's schools, and gave suggestions to schools that want to engage and motivate Mexican and Mexican parents. Findings revealed that for Mexican and Mexican-American mothers, education is the key for their children's success. Even though they value education, these mothers found several barriers as they tried to get involved in their children's schools and education. Work commitments, language, and lack of childcare were the main obstacles participants identified. Participants expressed overall satisfaction about their children's schools and teachers, but recognized that they needed to improve their relationships with them.

This study contributes to the current study of parental involvement because for the first time the topic was examined through the lens of communications theories. This research examined Mexican and Mexican-American parents as a public of an organization and studied their communication behaviors in order to identify ways of better engaging them.

In the process of completing this thesis I had several moments where my perceptions as a mother and as member of the Hispanic community changed. I could see the struggles of these mothers, and I felt a connection with them, as I understood that regardless of where we are from or what we do, we all want the same for our children: the best education and opportunities. Along this process, I also realized that many immigrant parents face the challenge of raising children in a different culture, with different values and traditions, and sometimes it is difficult to combine our objectives with those of the education system.

Moreover, I found very interesting the fact that most of the mothers I interviewed showed gratitude after talking to me. It was as if they never had the chance of talking about issues that were important for them, and they felt empowered by having someone asking them their opinion on matters that are part of their daily lives, but they rarely get to discuss. This study showed me that when these mothers are given a voice, they could provide insightful information and be more open to modify their behaviors. Many of the participants expressed to me their willingness to volunteer or participate more in their children's schools. I believe all they need is more education and an opportunity to show that they can help.

I hope that this research has an impact in the Mexican community. I acknowledge the efforts of many schools and schools systems that try every day to serve Spanish-speaking parents. However, I think that many more can benefit from this study and its conclusions. I understand the budget constrictions, but if administrators and teachers take the time to understand Mexican and Mexican-American parents, their traditions, values, and expectations, they will have more tools to get them more involved, and ultimately improve the academic level of the students and the schools.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Summary of main concepts of the situational theory of publics

Term	Definition	Example
Problem recognition	Process by which people detect that something needs to be done about a situation and think about what to do	A mother realizes that she needs to help her child with his homework
Constraint Recognition	Perceived or actual barriers that prevent people from doing something about a problem	Instruction for the homework are in English and the mother does not speak English. She is aware of her limitations and worries she cannot help her son
Level of Involvement	Extent to which people connect themselves to an issue	The mother watches on TV a commercial selling an English course. She gets interested because she needs to learn English in order to help his son with his homework
Referent Criterion	"a solution carried from previous situations to a new situation" (Grunig, 1997)	The mother remembers that her cousin once helped his son with his homework, so she starts thinking if there is another family member who can help her this time
Information seeking	Concern deliberate, active communication behaviors	The mother calls her son's teacher and ask her for directions in Spanish
Information processing	Passive absorption of information	The mother overhears another parent talking about a tutor who helps children with homework
Active public	Publics who are actively seeking information and are potentially sharing information with others	Parents who attend PTA meetings and are constantly involved in conversations with their children teachers and other parents regarding school matters
Aware public	Publics who have high problem recognition and involvement, but due to high levels	Parents who know it is important for them to attend parent-teacher conferences, but

	of constraint recognition, are not moved to act	due to lack of transportation or scheduling conflicts cannot attend the meetings
Latent public	Publics who have low problem recognition, but medium to high levels of involvement	Parents who do not understand the importance of getting more involved in schools, but if asked, would serve as volunteers or attend special functions
Non-public	Publics who have no knowledge of a problem and are not involved	A couple who has no children and does not have any involvement with the school system

Appendix B – Summary of main concepts of the relational approach

Term	Definition
Relationship management	Theoretical framework for the practice of public relations that has demonstrated how organization-public relationships can enhance the organization's ability to achieve its mission, by finding balance between organizational and public interests (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004)
Dialogue	Ideal way of building ethical and fulfilling relationships, facilitating an interactive communication.
Indicators to evaluate quality of organization-public relationships	
Trust	One's confidence on the other party and willingness to open up to the other party
Control mutuality	Degree of agreement between the two parts about who decides relationship goals and how power in the relationship is balanced
Relational satisfaction	Is the extent to which both parties are satisfied with the relationship
Relational commitment	The extent to which each party believes the relationship is worth maintaining

Appendix C – Interview Protocol

This is a list of the variables of the situational theory of publics. Some of the questions are marked to determine what variable they can help identify.

- Problem recognition: PR
- Constraint recognition: CR
- Level of involvement: LOI
- Relationship management: RM
- Information processing: IP
- Information seeking: IS

1. Tell me about a day in the life of your family.

2. What are your favorite activities as a family? What do you like to do together?

3. How many children do you have?

Probe: Tell me about your children. What are their ages.

4. What are your hopes for them?

Probe: What do you want for them in the future?

Probe: How does education fit into your hopes? What education do you want them to obtain?

5. What does the word "education" mean to you?

Probe: What is your biggest concern in regards to your child education?

6. What is your role in your children's education?

Probe: How do you educate your children?

Probe: What is your relationship to your children's teachers?

7. Walk me through the routine you and your children follow on a regular school day.

Probe: What language do you speak at home?

8. How much time do your kids spend in school and aftercare? What do you think about that? What is the effect on your children?

9. What do you think about your child's school? (RM)

Probe: What do you think about your child's teachers

10. What do you think about the school system here in the United States? (PR)

Probe: How is it different from your country?

Probe: Do you like it here better? Why or why not?

11. Have you attended a parent-teacher conference?

Do you remember how was your last experience in a Parent-Teacher conference at your child's school? (LOI, PR)

Probe: How did you feel about the conversation?

Did you have an interpreter o you spoke directly to the teacher?

How do you feel about the use of interpreters?

12. What do you think about parental involvement? Is it important for you? (PR)

Probe: Do you think Mexican/Mexican-American parents are involved in their children's education? Why/why not?

13. In your family, who is in charge of dealing with schools, checking homework, getting children ready for school, etc.?

14. Are you involved in any way in your child's school? (LOI)

Probe: Why/why not?

Probe: What makes it easy/hard for you to get involved? (CR)

Probe: Have you tried to find out which are the ways in which you can get involved? (IS)

15. Do you help your children with homework? (LOI)

Probe: How often do you do it?

Probe: Why/why not do you do it?

Probe: When you have problems helping your children with homework, who do you turn to? Where do you get help from? (IS, IP)

16. How often do you communicate with your child's teacher? (LOI)

Probe: Is it hard or easy to communicate with him/her? Why? (PR)

17. How do you feel about your child's education as a Mexican/Mexican-American parent?

Do you think that you feel different from other groups? (LOI)

18. How would you change the way your child's teacher/school communicates with you? (LOI)

Probe: If I were the school principal or a teacher, how could I get Mexican/Mexican-American parents like you to participate more in school?

20. How satisfied are you with your relationship with your children's school?

Probe: Why or why not are you satisfied? (RM)

21. Do you feel that the school is committed to build strong relationships with parents or wants them to be more involved? (RM)

22. What would you do to improve your level of communication with the school?

Probe: How could the school reach you better? What do they do now to reach you? Is that successful? (RM)

23. To what extent do you feel the school listens to your needs or has done anything in particular to accommodate to your needs? Can you give an example? (RM)

24. Would you describe any things that your children's school has done to treat you fairly and justly, or unfairly and unjustly?

25. Would you describe things that the school has done that indicate it can be relied on to keep its promises, or that it does not keep its promises?

26. How confident are you that your children's school has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do? Can you give me examples of why you feel that way?

27.Is there anything I left out or did not ask about that you feel is important for me to know?

Thank you for your time and help.

Appendix C – Interview Protocol (Spanish)

1. Cuéntame cómo es un día en la vida de tu familia.

2. ¿Cuáles son sus actividades favoritas como familia? ¿Qué les gusta hacer juntos?

3. ¿Cuántos hijos tienes?

    P: Cuéntame un poco sobre ellos, cuántos años tienen.

4. ¿Qué esperas de ellos?

    P: ¿Qué quieres para ellos en el futuro?

    P: ¿Qué papel tiene la educación en esos planes? ¿Qué tipo de educación quieres que reciban?

5. ¿Qué significa la palabra "educación" para tí?

    P: ¿Cuál es tu principal preocuapción con respecto a la educación de tus hijos?

6. ¿Cuál es tu papel en la educación de tus hijos?

P: ¿Cómo educas a tus hijos?

P: ¿Cuál es tu relación con los maestros de tus hijos?

7. Cuéntame cómo es la rutina que tu y tus hijos siguen en un día de escuela.

    P: ¿Qué idioma hablan en casa?

8. ¿Cuánto tiempo pasan tus hijos en la escuela y en otros programas después de clases? ¿Qué piensas de eso? ¿Qué efecto tiene esto en tus hijos?

9. ¿Qué piensas de la escuela de tus hijos?

P: ¿Qué piensas del maestro de tus hijos?

10. ¿Qué piensas del sistema escolar aquí en Estados Unidos?

    P: ¿Es diferente del de tu país? ¿Por qué?

    P: ¿Cuál te gusta más? ¿Por qué / por qué no?

11. ¿Dónde obtienes información sobre temas de educación y la escuela?

P: ¿Cuándo obtienes esa información qué haces?

12. ¿Has asistido a una conferencia de padres y maestros?

P: ¿Te acuerdas cómo fue la última experiencia que tuviste en una conferencia de estas?

P: ¿Cómo te sentiste con respecto a esa conversación?

¿Tuviste un intérprete o hablaste directamente con el maestro?

¿Qué piensas del uso de intérpretes?

13. ¿Qué piensas de la participación de los padres en las escuelas? ¿Es importante para ti?

P: ¿Crees que los padres mexicanos están involucrados en la educación de sus hijos?

¿Por qué o por qué no?

14. En tu familia, ¿quién está a cargo de lidiar con las escuelas, revisar la tarea, alistar a los niños para la escuela, etc.?

15. ¿Estás involucrado de alguna manera en la escuela de tus hijos?\

P: ¿Por qué o por qué no?

P: ¿Qué hace que involucrarte sea fácil o difícil?

P: ¿Has tratado de encontrar formas de poder participar o involucrarte?

16. ¿Les ayudas a tus hijos con las tareas?

P: ¿Cada cuánto lo hacers?

P: ¿Por qué o por qué no lo haces?

P: Cuando tienes problemas para ayudar a tus hijos con la tarea, a quién acudes? ¿Quién te ayuda?

17. ¿Cada cuánto te comunicas con la maestra de tus hijos?

P: ¿Es fácil o difícil comunicarte con ella? ¿Por qué?

18. ¿Como mexicano, cómo te sientes con respecto a la educación de tus hijos?

P: ¿Crees que te sientes diferente de padres de otros grupos? ¿Crees que, por ejemplo, los mexicanos ven la educación de forma distinta a como la ven los americanos?

19. ¿Cómo cambiarías la forma en que los maestros o la escuela de tus hijos se comunican contigo?

P: Si yo fuera la maestra o directora de la escuela, ¿cómo podría convencer a los padres mexicanos como tú de que paticiparan más en la escuela?

20. ¿Qué tan satisfecho estás con la relación que tienes con la escuela de tus hijos?

P: ¿Por qué o por qué no estás satisfecho?

21. ¿Sientes que la escuela está comprometida a construir relaciones fuertes con los padres o que quiere que ellos estén más involucrados?

22. ¿Qué harías para mejorar tu comunicación con la escuela?

P: ¿Cómo podría la escuela acercarse más a tí? ¿Qué hacen actualmente para comunicarse contigo? ¿Lo que hacen es efectivo?

23. ¿Sientes que la escuela escucha tus necesidades o ha hecho algo en particular para cumplir con tus necesidades? ¿Puedes darme un ejemplo?

24. ¿Crees que la escuela te trata justamente? ¿Han escuchado tus preocupaciones y hecho cambios? ¿Podrías describir cosas que la escuela ha hecho para tratarte de forma justa o injusta?

25. ¿La escuela le ha hecho promesa a los padres? ¿Cómo se hicieron esas promesas y quién las hizo? ¿Cumplió la escuela esas promesas? ¿Cómo te sientes sobre esa situación? ¿Ha habido otras oportunidades en las que la escuela no ha cumplido o si ha cumplido su palabra?

¿Puedes describir cosas que la escuela ha hecho que indiquen que se puede confiar en ella para cumplir las promesas o que nos las van a cumplir?

26. ¿Qué tanta confianza tienes en que la escuela seguirá mejorando? ¿Qué tanta confianza tienes en que la escuela de tus hijos tienen la habilidad de cumplir lo que dicen que harán? ¿Puedes dar ejemplos de por qué piensas así?

27. Hay algo más que me quieras decir, que creas que sea importante mencionar.

Gracias por tu tiempo y tu ayuda.

Appendix D – Consent Form

Georgia State University
Department of Communication
Informed Consent

Title: Engaging Mexican/Mexican American Parents In Schools: Using the Situational Theory of Publics to Motivate Parental Involvement

Principal Investigator: Natalie T. J. Tindall, Ph.D.; Linda Perez

I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to determine what Mexican/Mexican American parents think of their children's education and parental involvement in education. You are invited to participate because you are a self-identified Mexican/Mexican American individual who has children enrolled in one of the following metropolitan Atlanta public school systems: DeKalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett counties. A total of 20 participants will be recruited for this study. Participation will require 60 minutes (1 hour) of your time over one day.

II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will participate in in-depth interviews. The student investigator (Linda Perez) will conduct the interviews, and the interviews will last no longer than 60 minutes (1 hour). The interview will occur at a location that is comfortable and accessible for both the interviewer and the participant. Your participation is limited to one day.

III. Risks:

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits:

Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to obtain information that may help educators better understand issues related to Mexican/Mexican American parental involvement and can help school systems create well supported strategies to improve communication with Mexican/Mexican American parents and to better engage Mexican/Mexican American parents.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Natalie Tindall and Linda Perez will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly [GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)]. The information you provide will be stored in the primary investigator's locked office (if the transcripts are printed) and on a password- and firewall-protected computers. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VII. Contact Persons:

Contact Natalie Tindall at 240-678-5680 (cell) and jountt@langate.gsu.edu if you have questions about this study. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded, please sign below.

_____ _____
Participant Date

_____ _____
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent Date