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Culture and Practice of Mexican Primary Schooling:
Implications for Improving Policy and Practice in the U.S.*

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Abstract

Children of Mexican immigrant families represent the largest segment of immigrant children in the U.S. Achievement gaps of Mexican immigrant children compared to their peers present at the beginning of kindergarten persist throughout the K-12 years. These achievement differences are partly influenced by the level cultural and linguistic sensitivity in the school. This paper explores the cultural context of schooling at a public primary school in México via field observations and interviews with students, teachers, school administrators, and parents. Findings are couched in the context of improving practices and policies in U.S. schools that serve Mexican immigrant children.

Introduction

Children of Mexican immigrant families represent one of the fastest growing student populations in the United States (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In 2000, 39 percent of all children from immigrant families—families in which at least one parent is foreign-born—were of Mexican origin. After Mexico, no other country-of-origin accounted for more than 4 percent of the total population of children from immigrant families (Hernández, 2004).

Recent attention in U.S. education policy and practice has begun to focus on assessing and improving educational outcomes for young children in early education, including preschool and K-3, for at least three reasons. First, at the beginning and throughout the early years of education, there are vast differences in school readiness and academic achievement by socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity (Galindo, 2005; Rathbun, West, & Germino-Hausken, 2004; Reardon, 2003). Second, some approaches to early education, particularly in preschool, have demonstrated a capacity to produce at least modest improvements in academic performance and persistence of low SES students that contribute to greater success in life than comparable students who have not had the benefit of these interventions (Currie, 2001; Ramey and Ramey, 1998); and a few elementary school strategies have shown evidence of produce modest gains (Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown, 2002). Third, early interventions (e.g., public-funded preschool) are extremely cost-effective (Heckman & Masertov, 2004).

Children of Mexican immigrant families and the general public have much to gain, if wider use is made of the best existing strategies and substantial additional investments are made to develop more effective approaches. Importantly, they have the

potential to help children of Mexican immigrant families to acquire the knowledge and skills required to participate in the modern economy (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Zhou, 1997). The general public also benefits from these increases in human capital (Becker, 1994). However, in the case of Mexican immigrant children, this paper argues that, without an enlightened discussion and integration of cultural factors into our policies, curriculum, and instructional practices, the rate of educational progress may be considerably slower than would otherwise be the case (Seitzinger-Hepburn, 2004). That is, data collected and presented herein suggest that positive socioemotional and academic student outcomes are more likely to emerge when the context of schooling—especially during the early years (i.e., 4 to 8 years old)—validates and appropriately incorporates a child’s home language and cultural practices.

The notion of cultural relevance as a means engaging students and leveraging outcomes in K-12 education is not new and continues to evolve in the U.S. (Banks & Banks, 2003; García, 2001). School personnel who are aware of and responsive to cultural components associated with the educational contexts of their students are more likely to facilitate positive student outcomes (Valdés, 1996). Considerations of the intersection between culture and schooling become even more imperative when evaluating the schooling context of children from immigrant families. In this case, to understand meaningfully the cultural aspects related to schooling, it is advantageous to consider the family’s native context: the country-of-origin. Therefore, to think strategically through ways in which U.S. educational policy and practice can better meet the needs of children from Mexican immigrant families, I propose we take into account the culture and practice of primary schooling in México. To do this, I adhere to

Alexander's (2000) recommendation that international and comparative studies in primary education evaluate the intersection of schooling and culture at multiple levels: a) systems, policies, and histories, b) schools, c) classrooms, and d) pedagogy (including didactics, curriculum, teaching, learning, and control). Data analyzed and discussed in this paper briefly touch on each of these levels. Data analyses provide critical categories which are valuable to U.S. educators and subsequent research. This paper, therefore, is consciously directed toward policymakers, practitioners, and scholars who serve and research children from Mexican immigrant families in U.S. elementary school systems.

I begin by summarizing evidence that supports the conclusion that it is in the national interest to improve educational outcomes for Mexican children in the U.S. This is done in two ways: a) by reviewing recent demographic trends in the United States and b) by analyzing trends and sources of low educational achievement levels of Mexican immigrant children. Next, I review concurrent research and conceptual work that contextualizes the imperative of considering children's familiar linguistic and cultural practices relevant to early educational settings. Lastly, in order to provide a window into the culture and practice of Mexican primary schooling, I present some qualitative data collected at a public primary school (grades 1-6) in México during the spring/summer of 2004. These data allow the reader to begin to understand what the culture of schooling means to Mexican children and families and, hopefully, how to emulate strategically this culture in feasible ways that promote meaningful educational experiences and outcomes for Mexican immigrant children in the U.S. Although the data presented herein are preliminary—they were collected over a short period of time: 5 weeks—it is my hope

that this piece will stimulate discussion about the potential for this approach to contribute to better educational outcomes for this rapidly growing segment of the nation's children.

Throughout this document I have used the terms *immigrant* and *emigrant* and consider it an important introductory point to decipher definitional differences between the two. The former, *immigrant*, refers to an individual who enters and usually becomes established in a country of which he or she is not native-born. The later term, *emigrant*, refers to an individual who has departed from a country to settle elsewhere. Thus, as an illustration, U.S. residents would identify foreign-born Nigerians who come to reside in the U.S. as *immigrants* because they came from another country. This same group would be referred to as *emigrants* by Nigerian residents because they departed from their country-of-origin to reside in another place, the U.S. in this case.

Demographic Trends

The influx of children of immigrants in the United States continues to impact early education systems, causing us to constantly rethink how we shape educational policy and execute inclusive educational practice (García-Coll & Szalacha, 2004). The U.S. has historically been a nation of immigrants, a country with a large foreign-born population. Since the 1920s, the foreign-born percentage of the total population has been on the constant rise (Passel & Fix, 2001). In March 2003, the population in the United States included 33.5 million foreign-born individuals, representing 11.7 percent of the U.S. population. As the total U.S. foreign-born population continues to increase proportionally compared to the total U.S. population, the Hispanic share of the foreign-born population has dramatically increased compared to Europeans and Asians (see Table

1). More than 53 percent of the foreign-born population in 2003 was from Latin America (not including Puerto Rico, which is a U.S. Territory).

Children of immigrants—i.e., children who have at least one foreign-born parent—are rapidly forming a very significant portion of the total U.S. child population. Amounting to nearly 11 million, 1 in 5 children in the United States is a child of immigrants (Fix & Passel, 2003; Shields & Behrman, 2004). In 2000, children in immigrant families—3 out of 4 of whom are U.S.-born—comprise over 20 percent of the total child population (see Table 2). Indeed, immigrant youth are the fastest growing section of the child population in the U.S. and since 1990, the number of children in immigrant families has expanded nearly seven times faster than the number in U.S.-born families (Hernández, 2004). Demographic projections suggest that by 2040, 1 in 3 children will be from immigrant families (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Consequently, schools are faced with the challenge of developing institutional and practical mechanisms that reinforce the academic engagement and attainment of children of immigrants, the majority of which are Hispanic (Conchas, 2001; Fix & Passel, 2003).

From 1900 to 1910, 2 percent of children of immigrants were from Latin America compared to 62 percent in 2000 (not including children of Puerto Rican parents). In 1990, 60 percent of all Hispanic children in the U.S. were from immigrant families (Pong, Hao, & Gardner, 2002). Increases of children in Hispanic immigrant families are largely due to the influx of newcomers from México, which in 2000 constituted 39 percent of all children in immigrant families. No other country of origin accounts for more than 4 percent of the population of children from immigrant families though more than one-hundred countries are represented by children of immigrants in the U.S.

(Hernández, 2004). The burgeoning presence of Mexican immigrant children in the U.S. is not likely to shift within the near future given that immigration and birth rates among Mexicans are very high, especially in comparison to groups from other nations (Pérez, 2004).

Educational Concerns

While immigrant families possess certain strengths compared to the overall population, which can contribute to the academic achievement of their children—e.g., healthy, intact families; strong work ethic and aspirations; and, for many, a cohesive community of fellow immigrants from the same country of origin—“[these strengths] are not always sufficient to keep children on pathways to success over time” (Shields & Behrman, 2004). There is an array of challenges for children of immigrant families relative to academic and scholastic success. Children of immigrants, for example, are more likely to live in poverty—1 in 4 of the nation’s low-income children are new immigrants or children of immigrants in the U.S. (Greenberg et al., 2004; Hernández, 2004). As a result, Hernández (2004) points out that children from immigrant families, compared to children of U.S.-born parents, are more likely to live in crowded housing. In addition, they, on average, have parents with less formal education, less access to work programs and federal welfare (largely due to 1996 federal welfare policy reform), less Internet and computer access, are less likely to attend pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs, less likely to be covered by health insurance, more likely to be behind a grade in school, and are more likely to experience home-school language disparities (Fix et al., 2001; Greenberg et al., 2004; Hernández, 2004; Pérez, 2004; Shields & Behrman, 2004).

Compared to the general immigrant child population, children of Mexican immigrant parents are a special cause for concern because of their large and rapidly growing numbers and high rate of academic risk factors. Over 5.1 million children in the U.S. are children of undocumented or documented Mexican immigrants, representing 39 percent of the total number of children from immigrant families (Fix & Passel, 2003; Hernández, 2004; Shields & Behrman, 2004). Comparing all nation-of-origin groups, immigrant Mexican mothers and fathers are the least likely to have a high school diploma (Hernández, 2004). This is especially significant because parent educational attainment is perhaps the most central feature of family circumstances relevant to overall child well-being and development, regardless of race/ethnicity or national immigrant origin.

Conceptual Framework

The role of schools is an essential component in the educational success of immigrant children. Schooling serves as a context in which they have the potential to gain academic knowledge, internalize societal schemes, and learn how to integrate themselves into a complex economic system. However, these outcomes often do not materialize. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) found in a longitudinal study that immigrant students struggled to functionally integrate themselves into U.S. school culture. The longer they stayed in school, the worse their overall physical and psychological health. Authors of this study noted that the more immigrant students became ‘Americanized’, the more likely they were to engage in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and delinquency (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 5).

Undesirable outcomes such as these are at least partially attributable to the fact that immigrant children are disproportionately attending “at-risk” schools. Crosnoe (2005) found this to be the case for young Mexican immigrant children. Analyzing data from a national sample of kindergartners, Crosnoe (2005) found that “children from Mexican immigrant families were over represented in schools with a wide variety of problematic characteristics”.

Examining the role that contextual, racial, and cultural factors play in children’s development during middle childhood (age 6-12 years), García-Coll and Szalacha (2004) propose that school characteristics, policies, and philosophies within the classroom, school, and school district serve as inhibiting and/or promoting factors toward educational attainment. Studies show that classroom, school and school district factors are more likely to promote student achievement of children of immigrant families when there is compatibility between school and family cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Conchas, 2001; García-Coll & Szalacha, 2004).

Enlightened policies surrounding cultural and linguistic sensitivity and inclusion as mechanisms to boost immigrant children’s scholastic success are only useful when continuity exists between educational policy and practice. In a study of immigrant families in New York City, Lipsit (2003) found that sensitive and enlightened educational policy developed around the well-being, academic attainment, and inclusiveness of immigrant families failed because policies were unknown and remained unimplemented by school staff. Thus, top-down policies as forms of improving academic outcomes for at-risk students only function when they are known, understood, and implemented with integrity by school staff. Conchas (2001) analyzed the within group variability of urban

Latino students' academic achievement and found that higher achieving students attributed their success to institutional mechanisms that impacted their levels of school engagement. Institutional processes were meaningful because educational approaches offered by the school staff and school systems consciously targeted the academic achievement and attainment of immigrant and other students who can often be marginalized.

Seitzinger-Hepburn (2004) provides insightful, research-based suggestions to school policy-makers and practitioners striving to understand and incorporate the home language and culture of immigrant children and families. Throughout the "tool kit", Seitzinger-Hepburn (2004) recommends that the child's native language, culture, and home practices be recognized and fit into the curriculum and instructional practices, especially in early education programs. Tremendous differences between school and home linguistic and cultural practices become problematic because "the fundamentals of socialization are culturally embedded and established during the early childhood years" (Seitzinger-Hepburn, 2004, p. 9).

While structuring educational policies and programs for children of immigrants, García-Coll and Szalacha (2004) emphasize the need to move from "one-size-fits-all" approaches to more contextualized methods that "allow families to make more choices about their participation in various aspects of the program to better fit their needs". For instance, encouraging the involvement of immigrant parents in the educational process of their children is achieved through validating and embracing parental differences and is key to students' optimal academic performance (Cohen, 1998; García-Coll et al., 2002; Greenberg et al., 2004; Ramírez, 2003). In order to integrate consequential and

substantive parental involvement and generally improve the educational well-being of children in immigrant families, Suárez-Orozco (2001) maintains that schools ought to constantly evaluate and restructure how they frame school failure and success in order to be culturally and linguistically unbiased. They also suggest that school teachers ought to have high expectations for immigrant children and foster a climate of cooperative learning.

To facilitate this process and to establish meaningful educational achievement marks, effective school strategies, and successful teaching methods for children from Mexican immigrant families, I recommend that educational researchers investigate schooling beyond our borders. I conjecture that purposeful endeavors to understand the cultural climate and educational practices of Mexican public schooling—most Mexican immigrant families have experience with public education systems—will provide useful information for policymakers and practitioners that serve Mexican immigrant children in the U.S. public education system. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide descriptive and preliminary qualitative data regarding the cultural context in which social and educational practices evolve in a public Mexican elementary school that serves a proportionally high percentage of families considering migration to the United States of America. To assure anonymity of the individuals involved in the study, I have changed the name of the primary school and those of the participants. Before presenting these data and introducing the categories that emerged through my analyses, I briefly discuss the historical and institutional context of primary schooling in México.

Historical and Institutional Context

Post-revolution socialism in 20th century México spurred an effort to strengthen public education for *niños mexicanos*, an effort which continues to evolve (Levinson, 2001; Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). Over the past 25 years, federal government has sought to decentralize primary basic education (first through sixth grade) to the states, which are essentially responsible for managing publicly financed basic and post-basic education in México (Palafox, Prawda, & Velez, 1992; Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). Meanwhile, the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (The Mexican Federal Ministry of Education [SEP]) establishes certain educational policies. For example, under recent federal mandate, children starting first grade are required to have completed at least one year of preschool (or kindergarten, which is not included in *la primaria*) before beginning public primary schooling. Though there is some speculation as to whether school principals and state bodies that oversee primary students actually enforce this law, concurrent federal legislation at least reflects an acknowledgement of critical early educational intervention. As a result, over the past decade and a half, national enrollment of five-year old children in schooling has increased nearly 15 percent. In 2000, 70.9 percent of five year-olds and 93.8 percent of children ages 6-12 years attended some type of formal schooling in the Mexican Republic. In the state of Morelos (the data collection site in the present study), 62.7 percent of five-year-olds and 93.5 percent of children ages 6-12 years were registered in 2000 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Información [INEGI], 2001).

A recent report by the RAND Corporation (Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005) provides a rich foundation of background and contextual information on the K-12 education system in México. It highlights the main educational issues in the country and

challenges related with them. For example, this report explains that access to basic education (grades 1-9) is much higher than in subsequent grades. Out of every 100 children who enter the first year (age 6) of basic education, 68 complete all nine years of basic education, 35 go on to secondary education (grade 10-12), and slightly more than 8 graduate from secondary education (equivalent to a high school diploma) (Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). Regarding course content, ninety-three percent of primary education in México uses the general modality, which is a traditional approach that incorporates a uniform, nationally-approved curriculum. Indigenous communities often use varying versions of the national curriculum. Students attending indigenous primary schools often receive national textbooks translated in their native language. These have recently been available in more than 25 indigenous languages by the SEP (Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005).

Research Design

Data presented in this study were collected in an exploratory fashion by gathering qualitative information (via interviews, observations, and field notes) on categories as they emerged. Specifically, I was interested in categories I deemed held some substantial influence over the culture of primary education. That is, my interests and attention were guided by practices and procedures I perceived had a strong effect on how *la primaria* operated and contributed to school life (including social and academic aspects), family and school integration, and student expectations and outcomes. Realizing who my audience would eventually be—policymakers, researchers, and scholars serving and studying Mexican immigrant children in the U.S.—I focused on categories I sensed would be relevant to improving cultural competence in U.S. schools.

To be clear, the process of data collection, coding, and analysis were impacted by the hypothesis that increasing academic performance for children of Mexican immigrant families in U.S. education systems is facilitated by properly addressing the cultural context of Mexican primary schooling, by validating children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Seitzinger-Hepburn, 2004). Understanding that schooling is not merely wrought by schools and teachers, but parental involvement in schools and educational practices in the home impact children's educational attainment (Barton & Coley, 1992); this study seeks to unravel some critical aspects within a Mexican primary public school context so as to inform educational researchers, policymakers, and practitioners who serve Mexican immigrant families in the U.S.

The qualitative data—taken largely from direct observations and semi- and non-structured interviews at an elementary school in the heart of México—are presented here. Due to my interest in generally exploring public primary education in México, especially in areas that have high U.S. emigration rates, I observed classroom instructional practices, interviewed parents of enrolled children, observed teacher-parent engagement, interviewed school staff and students, and made thematically wide-ranging observations of school practice and culture in numerous locations on campus. Instead of posing quantifiable queries and investigating deductively particular components of primary schooling in México, I chose to conduct qualitative data collection using a phenomenological approach. That is, throughout the data collection process, I attempted to gain entry into the conceptual world of Mexican primary schooling culture via empirical induction (Geertz, 1973), steered by descriptive data: interviews, participant observations, and some archival record analysis. These procedures offered me a window

into parent-child, teacher-parent, and teacher-child interactions and relationships at Mejardo elementary school. Collectively, via data collected at *la primaria* and analysis, I sought to unwrap what primary schooling means to Mexican children and their parents, how education is fashioned within *la primaria*, and what cultural processes tend to constitute public schooling at a *primaria mexicana*. Data from field notes, observations (in classrooms and other locations on school grounds), and interviews were categorically coded and analyzed based on etic and emic themes (Currall & Towler, 2003). Categories were constructed by what I deemed to be meaningful in the cultural school context. Nearly 20 categories emerged as a result.

This broad and arguably unfocused research endeavor introduces some considerable limitations. Perhaps most significant, because of its vast breadth, this study does not reveal much descriptive depth of the schooling processes being investigated. Descriptive depth is also inhibited by the fact that I visited *la primaria* for a short period of time: five weeks. Thus, though findings in this study may prove useful to those interested in critical educational-related questions to investigate further, results certainly fall short of generalizability and being definite. Another component to be considered in any qualitative piece is researcher bias. As a young Anglo-American in an elementary school in the heart of México; students, teachers, and parents were prompt to notice my presence. While reactions to my visits and investigative interests were indisputably variable; subjects at *la primaria* may have altered typical behavior because of my presence, obscuring the formative naturalism of my observations.

Though I only spent five weeks at Mejardo, I was able to collect a substantial amount of descriptive data. Sifting through nearly 140 pages of field notes and five hours

of interviews with students, teachers, parents, and school administrators has proven somewhat daunting. Because my research foci were fairly unrestrained, data I collected treat a wide span of topics, thus forfeiting graphic depth at the expense of ambitious breadth. Nonetheless, I am confident that further ethnographic research has the potential to mend any holes I may have neglected yet called to recognition. The data I present in this paper describe a portion of the general public school environment in México and at Mejardo elementary. Namely, in this report I present some ways in which parents involve themselves at a *primaria*, consider the *grupo escolar*, highlight distinctions between morning and afternoon *primaria* schooling, and reflect on some cultural components of Mexican childhood education. Beforehand discussing these categories however, I discuss how I gained access to Mejardo and selected it as my field site. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and are presented in this paper in English. I did the translations.

Gaining Access to the School

Because I identified the audience to whom I would direct this research (constituents in the U.S. who serve young Mexican immigrant students) while conceptualizing the study and before data collection, I wanted the field site to be a *primaria* with a high index of U.S. emigration. This approach was based on the assumption that the culture and practice of schooling at a Mexican *primaria* with a high rate of U.S. emigration would have more relevance to the schooling of Mexican immigrant children in the U.S. than data from a randomly selected *primaria*. Hence, I searched out a public primary school situated in a lower-class neighborhood—both characteristics of areas from which families flee México for the U.S.

Knowing the right people and having a supportive mentor from the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos (UAEM) proved vital in gaining access to an elementary school—*la primaria*—with a high emigrant population. However, it did not come without challenge: confronting Mexican bureaucracy. With the endorsement of my mentor, I asked the UAEM secretary to write me a letter of request to the Morelos state department of education (IEBEM) to provide me with written consent to access three public primary schools (grade 1-6) that have a high index of U.S. emigration. After this, I contacted the IEBEM Vice President of Educational Research, Mónica, to let her know of our solicitation. Reacting with what I perceived as skeptical trepidation, Mónica indicated that the IEBEM would need to receive a detailed report of what I would be investigating before granting me access to the schools. Having sensed her obvious reluctance to accommodate the request of a young American male, I handed the phone over to my mentor who subsequently eased Mónica's concerns by validating the scholarly merit of my project and assuring her of UAEM's approval. Without this provision, I feel gaining IEBEM's consent would have proven nearly unattainable.

The following day, in the company of a UAEM education student, I took the letter of request, granted by the university, to the IEBEM at a time which Mónica and I had agreed to meet. Disappointingly, upon arrival we were informed by Mónica's secretary that she was in an important meeting and would not be able to attend us. Informing the secretary of our appointment, we politely asked her to find out whether we could interrupt Mónica for a brief moment in order to promptly greet her and hand in our letter of request. Halfheartedly and practically annoyed, the secretary conceded. Minutes later Mónica sat with us and quickly began to direct questions concerning the purpose of my

project and the reasons for my particular interest in developing such a project. I plainly indulged her queries, which appeared to calm her otherwise unsteady nerves. Having agreed to deliver a copy to the IEBEM of any published material that would result from the project, I left her with my personal information, including my home address in the U.S., my temporary address in México, my Mexican and U.S. telephone numbers, and two e-mail addresses. Again, the confident compliance I showed seemed to calm her uneasiness. She and I concurred that I would receive access to three schools that serve communities with proportionally high U.S. emigration rates, that I would visit all three initially, and that I would ultimately choose one of the three at which to carry out observations and data collection for a period of five weeks.

I had not anticipated tackling the degree of apprehension that Mónica displayed. Was this because I was a *gringo* asking for access to a Mexican public institution? Was it because the education administration generally chose to be protective of individuals who were permitted to share environments with their children? Whatever the reasons, I quickly realized that I must be prepared to face skepticism and anxious concern on the part of some Mexican constituents—something I later witnessed on the part of some teachers, parents, and school administrators. By the end of my five-week observations, I was able to concisely divulge the purpose of my project and the reasons for my interest in a quick 30-second summary that eased the distress of most individuals, and even facilitated dialogue with informative participants.

After visiting with principals from the three *primarias*, I decided to conduct my data collection at Mejardo elementary school in Temixco, Morelos for two reasons. First, the openness and genuine support I felt from Ricardo, the Mejardo school principal, made

me feel teachers and parents alike would be apt to respond positively to my presence in school and meet my queries with integrity. More than any of the other principals, Ricardo seemed to understand why I had taken an interest in investigating Mexican primary school culture. He even offered input regarding how I might most effectively gather data, suggesting, for example, that I assemble a meeting with all the teachers to form an interactive focus group. Second, *la escuela* Mejardo was only a 30-minute bus ride from my temporary residence in Cuernavaca. Located about 10 kilometers south of Cuernavaca, Temixco is a city of nearly 100,000 inhabitants (INEGI, 2001). Cuernavaca, on the other hand, is home to nearly 400,000 people and is well-known in México and internationally for its year-round tropical climate, historic Hernán Cortez fortress and *hacienda*, and several Spanish language institutes that attract language students from around the globe.

Public primary schools (grade 1-6) in Temixco serve approximately 16,000 students (INEGI, 2001). As of May 2004, Mejardo school served 641 children matriculated in 16 classrooms—two first-grade classes, three second-grade classes, three third-grade classes, three fourth-grade classes, three fifth-grade classes, and two sixth-grade classes. The number of students in each class ranged from 30-45 (mean = 40). The physical layout of the *la primaria* Mejardo was very similar to dozens of other *escuelas públicas* I had seen in México. Shown in Figure 1, Mejardo is surrounded by a block wall and has one entrance: a heavy green, metal *portón* or gate. Classrooms made of cement block, cement floors, black metal doors, and barred windows enclosed the main and minor courtyards where children dance, play during recess, have physical education classes, and eat lunch. A multi-purpose room next to a fourth grade classroom was used

for staff meetings, parties, parent meetings, as an activity room, etc. The layout of the school seemed strategically structured so as to promote a sense of community within Mejardo. All of the classrooms faced the courtyard. Though the physical layout of Mejardo allowed each classroom to be distinguishable from the others within which teachers enjoyed a degree of autonomy, a salient quality of school solidarity and identity was outstanding. At any given moment, virtually all classroom doors were left open, allowing other school teachers and parents to frequently stop by to visit the classroom for various reasons.

After spending five weeks observing at Mejardo, and visiting with students, parents, and school faculty in and outside of the classroom, I had an ample amount of data. Upon returning to Arizona, I spent a considerable amount of time coding, analyzing, and mulling over the information I gathered. Anticipating the audience to whom I would present my findings, I decided to code the data into three general categories: *el grupo escolar* (the school group), *el turno matutino vs. vespertino* (the morning vs. afternoon shift), and *el comité de padres* (the parent committee). In the following section I present data by these categories. I explain the categories as concepts, offer assertions based on trends in the data, and briefly speculate on how this information might relate to the context of U.S. schools that serve children from Mexican immigrant families.

Findings

El Grupo Escolar

Beyond the increasing enrollment rates, certain cultural trends in *la primaria mexicana* have evolved to unofficially define the practice of primary schooling in

México. For example, children wear uniforms that display the name, logo, and respective colors of their school. While the intricacy of uniforms fluctuates between schools, children enrolled in *la primaria* are required by school administrators to wear a school uniform. These typically consist of a collared shirt with khaki pants for boys, a skirt and long socks/stockings for the girls, and dark shoes. Parents are expected to purchase the uniforms through their own economic means. On one occasion, the school principal at Mejardo indicated to me that students arriving to school without a complete uniform are told to return home by their teacher or another school staff member.

It is also typical for children in Mexican basic education to be assigned to a *grupo escolar*. As school staff matriculate new and incoming students into *la primaria*, children are randomly assigned to a teacher, a classroom, and, therefore, a *grupo escolar*. The *grupo escolar* not only experiences their first year of public primary schooling together, but, unless he or she moves to another school, also shares teachers and classrooms throughout their primary school career. Levinson (2001) offers an extensive amount of ethnographic data as a window into the schooling context and pedagogically pragmatic impacts of the of the *grupo escolar* in a Mexican middle school. Indeed, considering children spend up to six years together in similar and confined social and educational settings within *la primaria*, uniquely attracting psychosocial and practically functional processes, and behaviors result from the *grupo escolar*. Due to the *grupos escolares*, students at Mejardo became intimately acquainted with collaborative learning exercises, the vitality of group work within the classroom, and the need to develop strong and meaningful social bonds within the classroom in order to academically and socially subsist. Intrigued by the socioeducational dynamics of the *grupo escolar*, I interviewed

some sixth grade students during a recess at Mejardo about their experiences in their *grupo*. Half of the subset of students from *grupo* 6A that I interviewed on this occasion had spent all six years at Mejardo together. (B = Bryant, C = children or child)

B: “During these past years, have you managed to always get along with each other?”

C: (answering at the same time, loudly) “Yes!...No!...Sometimes” (one student stated) “Sometimes we fight”

B: (asking them to answer one at a time) “When do you fight?”

C1: (I call on one child to answer) “During physical education”

C2: (another child responds) “playing soccer we are rough”

B: “And when do you get along?”

C3: “In class, during our work”

B: “And what if you weren’t always in the same group together?”

C4: “We would never adapt because we would always have to make new friends.”

During the same recess, I interrupted another bunch of sixth graders from playing a soccer game during recess to ask them similar questions regarding the *grupo escolar*—these children had previously agreed and were enthusiastic to participate in an interview, to have their voices chronicled on my cassette recorder.

B: “Has there been difficulties in the *grupo*?”

C: (answering simultaneously) “No...Yes...Sometimes”

B: “When do things go well?”

C1: “When there is a *convivio* [party]”

B: “What would it be like if you were to change *grupos* each year?”

C2: “We would never get accustomed”

Children’s conceptions of schooling were associated with and contextualized within their *grupo escolar*. In spite of periodical conflicts, students found it difficult to conceptually structure schooling at Mejardo without the construct, fraternity, and support of their *grupo*. Impressed by the degree of solidarity the *grupo escolar* appeared to produce, I was surprised by Ricardo’s (the school principal) response to my query regarding the reason(s) schools assigned children to permanent *grupos*. Anticipating a reply in connection with a need to systemically catalyze group work ethic and/or the socializing benefits of the *grupo escolar*, I suppose his answer reflected the pragmatic nature of a school administrator. He simply stated that children were formed and kept in *grupos escolares* as a way of facilitating matriculation at the beginning of each school year and to ease the burdensome task of record-keeping.

Nonetheless, the *grupo escolar* at Mejardo had emerged as a cultural norm that played a salient role in school culture. Children were aware of the *grupo* to which their friends and peers belonged. *Grupo* 1A would become 2A the following school year, 3A the following year, and so on. While children’s social circles outside of the classroom (e.g., during recess) were self-selected, children within the classroom learned to work communally, in collaboration, to complete assignments. Collectivism within the *grupo* was learned in 1st grade, their first year at Mejardo, and was reinforced by the *grupo* arrangement in subsequent school years and by successive teachers.

Regardless of whether *el grupo escolar* was established to smooth the progress of administration or as a conscious pedagogical strategy, the concept and practice is enmeshed in *primaria* culture. The notion of individual achievement rampantly

emphasized in traditional U.S. schooling might be considered inappropriate when applied to Mexican immigrant children who are socialized within a *grupo escolar*. Based on the principle of cultural responsiveness, policymakers, practitioners, and administrators who promote group cohesion as a component of reaching academic standards are more likely to achieve viable student outcomes.

Matutino vs. Vespertino

At the end of my first day of observation at Mejardo, I noticed that as children in white and navy blue uniforms were leaving the school to meet their mothers outside or to make their routine journey home—by foot or on the public bus—other children wearing green and white uniforms entered the *portón*, ready to begin their school day. Every day at 1:30 pm, I later discovered, *la primaria* Mejardo transformed into *la primaria* Pacheco. An entirely separate institutional organism, Pacheco had their own principal, teachers, and janitor. Though they shared the same classrooms, bathrooms, multi-purpose room, administrative offices, and play areas, Mejardo and Pacheco were independent schools. Other than buildings and territory, the two *primarias* shared nothing administratively or otherwise. Through some investigation, substantial differences between the two schools were noted. Pacheco elementary school, for example, had less student enrollment than Mejardo. Pacheco was an afternoon school (*el turno vespertino*) and Mejardo was a morning school (*el turno matutino*). The names of each school were painted above the school entrance (see Figure 5) and both received financial support, however minimal, from the government. Taken by the idea of having morning and afternoon school shifts, I naturally began to ask teachers and school administrators questions related to why the

two *turnos* existed and what social and/or educational differences were present between the two.

As I later found out that public primary school facilities throughout México generally house a *turno matutino* and a *turno vespertino*, my interest to learn more regarding differences between the two *turnos* became more pressing. Do teachers from both *turnos* have the same qualifications, salary, and class sizes? Do students from both *turnos* exhibit comparable academic performance levels? Were parental involvement levels similar between *turnos*? And so on. Gracious enough to indulge my queries, I interviewed Eric (teacher and principal) at one juncture and Maribel (retired teacher) on another occasion.

Maribel, mother of a third grade teacher at Mejardo, taught in the Mexican public primary education system for 33 years, 24 of which she spent balancing two classes, one from each *turno*—*el vespertino* and *el matutino*—in the morning and afternoon rotations. Because of her lengthy experience teaching the two *turnos* simultaneously, I felt her responses regarding *matutino* and *vespertino* comparisons would reflect a significant mark of confidence and integrity. After establishing that a salient difference between the two *turnos* is that class sizes are generally larger in the morning, I probed further. (M = Maribel)

B: “What other differences are there between the two *turnos*, in addition to class size?”

M: “At Mejardo, [...] the children that go to the *turno vespertino* [afternoon school] are the children that have problems, be it economic or learning

[problems]. The parents do not like to wake their children up early or they do not like to be asked [by the school] for supplies for [school] work. In the morning, there is more demand with regards to [the children's] uniform. They have to be clean.”

Captivated by the idea that children in afternoon schooling were more likely to be economically disadvantaged than those that attend in the morning, I asked Maribel to elaborate.

M: “[Children in the morning session] live in a very different manner than children in the afternoon [session]. The children in the afternoon come from the shacks. One day that you are able, tell [my son] to accompany you to see a cardboard house, the houses in which these poor people live.”

Trying to get a sense of whether poorer children attending school in the afternoon reflected the general scenario across the country or whether this was merely a phenomenon localized in Temixco, I inquired,

B: “Generally, are the poorer children in public primary schools attending the second rotation of school [in the afternoon]?”

M: “No, there are schools, for example, in Cuernavaca [...where] children, because there is no space, have to attend school in the afternoon. This does not mean they are at a lower [socioeconomic] level.”

Though Eric later indicated to me that there are indeed general social and economic differences across public *primaria* morning and afternoon rotations, Maribel did not affirm this.

Maribel continued discussing specific discrepancies between children attending the two *turnos*, at Mejardo and Pacheco schools. She mentioned that Mejardo children generally had higher academic achievement than those in the afternoon at Pacheco, and attributed lower performance to poor parental support.

M: “Afternoon children have more absences. Their parents do not give them support with their homework and they do not read to them. They do not take them to the library.”

Reflecting back to when she taught first grade at Mejardo and Pacheco the same academic year, she stated,

M: “With the morning children, they were able to advance more and quicker [than the afternoon children]”.

She maintained that children in the *turno matutino* were more likely to have attended kindergarten—*prescolar*—and were more likely to live in a house “that has running water, has power, and a bathroom.”

Making a generalization about children at Pacheco, she asserted,

M: “The majority of afternoon kids have a deficiency, which is not their fault.”

Regarding typical behaviors of Pacheco children, she said that they were less orderly and were more likely to fight. According to Maribel, children from the *turno vespertino* at Pacheco came to school dirtier, with uniforms that were poorly maintained. She stated that because of the underprivileged care they received at home,

M: “Afternoon children had fewer possibilities than morning children because of many reasons—because of their parents [and their] economic means.”

Subsequent dialogue with Eric—a sixth grade teacher at Mejardo and principal at a *turno vespertino* school approximately 10 blocks from Mejardo—revealed additional insight in connection with *matutino/vespertino* dissimilarities. The school at which Eric worked as school principal during *el turno vespertino* served 137 students at the initiation of the 2003-2004 school year, of which 115 remained by the end of this academic year, and the day of our interview on June 15th, 2004. In our interview, Eric pointed out that this attrition rate was a trademark of afternoon schools and that *vespertino* children display inordinately high amounts of mobility—a trend not demonstrated by morning children, at least in Temixco. (E = Eric)

E: “[At Mejardo], this year I began with 22 boys and 22 girls in sixth grade in the morning and now we are finishing the year and there were not any [students] who arrived or left.”

According to Eric, *vespertino* families moved from community to community and/or state to state looking for work and a permanent residence. I asked if U.S. emigrant families were more likely to have been served by a *matutino* or *vespertino* school, Eric stated that he had not given the concept much thought and was not quite sure. I assumed that this uncertainty was related to the fact that, unlike Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Estado de México, Zacatecas, etc., the state of Morelos had not traditionally exhibited relatively high rates in U.S. emigration (INEGI, 1993).

Eric’s view that *vespertino* children suffered deficient treatment at home coincided with responses from Maribel,

E: “There are significant differences. The *vespertino* families are more humble, economically speaking. [...] *Vespertino* children lack [and] are alone the majority

of the time. [...] There's no one to supervise that they are taken care of, that they bathe."

He stated that in the homes of *matutino* children "there is more vigilance". He mentioned that not all *vespertino* children came from neglectful homes and not all *matutino* children had the fortune of having loving parents—that "there are exceptions". Nonetheless, he emphatically reiterated that, in general, *matutino* parents "cooperated" (see the following section for a pragmatic and culturally-embedded understanding of the term "cooperate") and participated more with the school and their children's teachers.

E: "The parents that do not like to cooperate, the parents that do not have time to meet with the school, the parents that do not have money for a meticulous uniform—because a meticulous uniform in the morning session, he who does not wear it is sent home. But here, in the afternoon, it is permitted that children come wearing whatever. In the morning I suppose parents have two uniforms minimally so that when one gets dirty, the other is ready and everyday the child can wear his uniform. In the afternoon, there are children that do not have a uniform because their parents do not have the economic possibility or they have not shown an interest—often it is that they do not have an interest."

He continued,

E: "In the afternoon, we, the teachers, are more tolerant, although we should not be—but we are because our *grupos* have to have students. If we are as demanding as we are in the morning, these children would escape to their houses and would not study.

Clearly, Eric saw a vast difference between the *vespertino* and *matutino* home environments and that school personnel deals distinctly with the children from each *turno*. Relative to the underlying investigative interests of this research endeavor, questions begin to surface. What comparable morning/afternoon school systems exist beyond *la primaria*? How do criteria for retaining children in the two *turnos* differ? Are emigrant children and families more or less likely to have attended *el turno vespertino*? Do *vespertino* parents pay less “cooperation” fees (discussed in the next section)? What does education and schooling mean to *vespertino* children and families? Do these differ from meanings for *matutino* children and families? Are difference related to class, school infrastructure, family variables, etc.? And so on.

If academic achievement, family involvement, and socioeconomic differences between *matutino* and *vespertino* children—as suggested by Maribel and Eric—are prevalent across the country, knowing which *turno* a Mexican immigrant family attended before crossing the border would be useful to practitioners in U.S. schools. It may, for example, connote to school personnel the amount and quality of involvement and support to expect from parents. However, as noted previously, any recommendation based the assertion that differences between *turnos* exist requires further investigation. I present educationally relevant differences between morning and afternoon shifts as a hypothesis and as a matter for further discussion and research.

The Parent Committee and “Cooperation” Fees

Money is an underlying concern of many parents when they matriculate their children into *la primaria*—they wonder, “how much is this going to cost”? Although government funds provide teacher and administrative salaries in public *primarias*,

financial support does not extend much further than this. Until recent years, parents of *primaria* children were expected to purchase all books for their children. Now, a few textbooks are provided to each student by the federal government (Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). Public middle and high schools in México have not yet received subsidized texts. *Primaria* parents are expected to pay for their child's uniform(s), supplies beyond a few textbooks, and daily lunch money (at least 10 pesos a day). They are also expected to “cooperate”, which, as every Mexican knows, means to supply *dinero*—to pay an unofficial fee for their child to attend school.

At the initiation of each academic school year, members of the parent committee—a committee usually comprised of a half dozen or so mothers of students enrolled in *la primaria*—charge an inscription fee. The amount of this fee fluctuates by school and is determined by a democratic vote of all school parents (the overwhelming majority are mothers) toward the end of the previous school year. “Cooperation” amounts commonly range from roughly 70-500 pesos a year (a little less than 7-50 U.S. dollars), depending on the school. This money is used for physical school maintenance (e.g., painting walls, plumbing, school expansion, etc.), school events (e.g., graduation parties, etc.), and for instruction not included in general school curriculum (e.g., English). At the end of the school year, unused “cooperation” money that goes unused is re-distributed to the parents. At the end of the 2003-2004 school year, each child at Mejardo was reimbursed 26 pesos. Parent committee officers—though the committee is entitled “parental”, it is almost wholly comprised of women, *madres*—are selected by the actual parents and are given the charge to act in collaboration with school administration, advocating for the dominant voice of the parents.

Two or three times every school year, parental committee officers conduct a meeting for all parents and school administration. During the committee gatherings, pressing issues facing the school and parents are discussed, debated, and resolved via a final vote. While at Mejardo, I was able to witness one of these meetings—the last committee assembly of the school year—held on the front patio of the Mejardo campus. Over 100 parents were in attendance. All were women—mothers and grandmothers—except for one male, a child’s grandfather. Two police officers, two representatives from the state department of public safety, a state psychologist, and the school principal were also in attendance. The first to address the large crowd were state public safety representatives who directed a speech on domestic violence and abuse—what it is and how to report it. Next, the state psychologist spoke on public services available to the community, especially for abused families and children. (P = psychologist)

P: “We have noticed that abused children are the most aggressive, they have grades of seven and below, and they are the ones with the majority of problems in school.”

After the psychologist, Ricardo, the school principal was handed the microphone. Principal Ricardo communicated some brief thoughts around the responsibility of parents and the need of continued parental school involvement to advance the well-being of Mejardo. He emphasized that parents were to play an active part and offer a contributing voice to Mejardo by engaging the school on pressing issues, concerns they might have. Immediately after he made this remark, a mother in the assembly raised her hand and a concern. A chain that had been used at a prior time to block traffic from passing Mejardo during morning and afternoon hours when children were entering and leaving school

grounds had not been used in months. This mother was concerned that unblocked traffic presented a risk to her child. Instead of taking the responsibility upon him, principal Ricardo, in what seemed to me to be an effort to empower this woman, responded to her concern by encouraging this *madre* and the rest of the parents present to contact community officials and discuss it further with them.

After the principal's words and challenge to be proactive in community affairs, parent committee officers directed open discussion with the group on a number of issues: whether to continue employing the English teacher, whether to continue paying the bathroom cleaning lady, allocation of funds for school socials/festivities, setting the "cooperation" amount for the next school year, and other budgetary concerns. After fervent deliberation and discussion among the numerous parents present; agreement was reached by vote that the school would discontinue employing the English teacher, the bathroom cleaning would continue employment, and that the "cooperation" would remain at 100 pesos the next school year. By the time decisions were finalized, the committee meeting had lasted nearly two hours. I recall being impressed by the dedicated mothers in attendance who endured the lengthy meeting in the summer sun, standing on their feet all the while. One hundred parents were willing to sacrifice their personal time to take part in the committee process, share their perceptive and opinions with the group, contribute to their school community, and play an significant role in the educational well-being of their child(ren).

Mothers formed *grupo* committees in addition to the school's general parent committee. *Grupo* committees consisted of mothers of children in a *grupo escolar* who planned class parties assisted the classroom teacher when and wherever they could,

decorating the classroom, assisting with student presentations in class, programming school events in collaboration with other *grupo* committees, etc. On the morning of Thursday, June 24th, 2004, I arrived at Mejardo to find a dozen mothers waiting for the school to open their doors. As I entered with them, I asked what they would be doing today at the school. One mother, whom I engaged in a prior conversation, indicated that their *comité del grupo* was putting on a *convivio* (party) for the *grupo escolar* 6A. She invited me to join with them and help prepare for the festivities in the multi-purpose room, where women were *guisando* (cooking), blowing up balloons, setting up tables and chairs, talking amongst themselves, and laughing plentifully. They instantaneously integrated my assistance, dubbing me the official balloon blower. After completing my balloon-filling responsibility, I excused myself from the multi-purpose room to make my way around campus before the *convivio* began. I assured them I would return to join them, especially for the food and cake. All the school teachers were invited by the *grupo* committee to participate in the *convivio*, to eat and show their support for the *niños* in group 6A, who were soon to be graduating. There was plenty of food—*la comida* is rarely in short supply at Mexican gatherings—and everyone seemed thrilled to participate in the *convivio*. At one moment, those present were hushed by a member of the *grupo*'s committee—one of the mothers—so that attention would be given to Lorena, a sixth grader from *grupo* 6A who had prepared some words to share with everyone. In her short, memorized address, Lorena congratulated her peers, reminisced over the past six years, and expressed eagerness for the immediate future in middle school—*la secundaria* (grades 7-9). After she spoke, Lorena's mother, who was standing beside her all the

while, with a smile from ear to ear, gave her daughter a hug and a kiss as the *convivio* attendees applauded Lorena for her words.

The nature, quality, and quantity of parental involvement at *la primaria* Mejardo suggest implications to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers serving and investigating children of Mexican immigrant families in the U.S. First, the nature of parental involvement—maternal involvement for all practical purposes—at Mejardo was mostly administrative and extracurricular. Parents—almost entirely mothers—organized ways to improve physical facilities and how to best use “cooperation” fees to meet the physical and, in some cases, academic needs of their children while at school. The parental role at Mejardo contributed to a schooling context beyond mere academics. Parent contributions made *la escuela* an ambient of social training in which children mixed interactions between school personnel, friends, and family members on regular basis in a shared context. Parents spent much time, energy, and even their own money and food for school parties/celebrations—*convivios*— which were especially plentiful toward the end of the school year. These engagements were completely organized and made possible through parental efforts. Because government funds were sparse and did not cover essentials such as building repair and expansion, and salaries for instructors of courses outside the standard curriculum; parents pooled their money to “cooperate”, making these services possible. “Cooperation” thus developed a dual-meaning—a pragmatic and a literal definition. The pragmatic definition of a “cooperative” parent suggests that the parent pays the annual dues without failure and the literal simply connotes a parent who is participative in school affairs. Parents generally expected other parents to be “cooperative”, both pragmatically and literally. Finally, the quantity of

parental involvement at Mejardo was substantial—the proportional amount of volunteered human hours was quite high. Not all parents were involved in school-related affairs and some donated more of their time than others. However, a large percentage of parents demonstrated some involvement—e.g., over 100 parents representing 641 students (many of whom were siblings) attended a school-wide meeting—and several committed ample amounts of time participating in school and classroom parental committees.

A culturally responsive U.S. school model that serves children from Mexican immigrant families will strive to integrate parents in meaningful ways, based on the aforementioned data, as a means of increasing student achievement. Especially in early education programs, children who perceive a natural association between home and school cultural contexts are more likely to relate with and succeed at academic tasks. Efforts to improve levels of Mexican parental involvement in U.S. schools will provide social and informal contexts in which parents, teachers, students, and their siblings are able to freely interact. In other words, the school context ought to represent a sense of community in which parental aid and input are sought after, valued, and appreciated.

Further qualitative and quantitative analyses are needed to understand how parental involvement and student outcomes (e.g., socioemotional and academic) are related in *la primaria*; what strategies prove most effective to encourage and maintain Mexican parental involvement in U.S. schools; and how parental involvement can be leveraged to boost and sustain higher achievement patterns of their children.

Concluding Comments

Findings from this study afford parties concerned with the state of elementary education of children from Mexican immigrant families with valuable concepts. These concepts are important as we continue our efforts to seek to improve access and quality of education during the early trajectory (preschool through 3rd grade), and through the end of high school. As we carry on with our efforts to enlighten school reform policies—with the purpose of implementing viable and effective school practices—aspects related to cultural and linguistic awareness and responsiveness cannot be excluded from the equation. The data collected and presented in this paper are useful in this regard. Although it is not feasible (or remotely possible) that U.S. schools meticulously duplicate the culture of Mexican primary schooling, there are patterns that emerged at Mejardo germane to policymakers and practitioners seeking to enhance outcomes of students in the U.S.

Schooling at Mejardo was as much a social as it was an educational endeavor in which parents, children, teachers, and school staff played influential roles. Indeed, the Spanish word *educación* refers to much more than mere academic education. It is a more holistic term that connotes a process of formation through which, for example, a child is raised to respect others and function appropriately in Mexican family and society. *Un niño educado*—an educated child—is not just one who knows his or her ABCs but who also contributes to and identifies with the school group, and understands and follows social nuance and norms. In this sense, teachers were not alone in educating students at Mejardo. Parents were very much involved.

As a *matutino* school, schooling at Mejardo was strongly impacted by children's parents—much more than in the *vespertino* school—who were actively engaged in the

general school community and classrooms, assisting school personnel in practical ways. Almost entirely mothers, parents were organized and led by *el comité de padres*—a small body of elected mothers as officials. The *comité* maintained close and consistent contact with the school principal and teachers. They were in charge of collecting and managing “cooperation” funds, used for the maintenance (and expansion when necessary) of the school grounds, school parties (such as the annual sixth grade graduation), and to pay for curriculum and instruction not provided by the state. Parents, therefore, were pivotal in the schools ability to function and even subsist. Such patterns of ‘parent involvement’ might have certain implications for elementary school practitioners serving Mexican children in the U.S. First, parents might be more prone to involve themselves in U.S. schools if they perceive the schooling environment as a welcoming community in which their time and support are valued and needed. Second, the absence of father involvement in school appears to be staunchly cultural. Though I did not pursue this avenue in terms of data collection and analysis, it would be useful to know how Mexican families perceive the role of fathers in the social and academic formation of their children, and how schools might promote this involvement. Third, it would be important to know the extent to which the involvement of children’s parents in school impacts academic domains. Since parental involvement in México consisted more of social and administrative responsibilities, how does the involvement of parents in school influence academic outcomes? How can parental disposition to integrate themselves in school be leveraged to improve academic outcomes for their children? Since Mexican parents generally have low educational attainment, a reciprocal program in which parents learn

while contributing to the school seems very appropriate. These and similar questions are essentially empirical and lend themselves to further research and analyses.

The *grupo escolar* provided a sense of peer solidarity for students within the classroom and throughout their *primaria* experience. Though children within the *grupo* reportedly encountered occasional altercations, students mentioned that they appreciated being integrated in *grupos escolares* as a means of establishing stable friendships and working communally within the classroom. The notion of collective responsibility was reinforced through the *grupo*. Children often worked in collaboration in the classroom, even on individual seat work assignments. This was encouraged by teachers, except during exams. In a schooling culture that traditionally honors individual accomplishment, U.S. schools who serve children from Mexican immigrant families must consider how they will incorporate collectivistic ideals. Practitioners may find it useful, for example, to have children work in small groups in which members rely on one another's effort and commitment. In addition, students may benefit socially and/or academically from continuing in the same *grupo* over a number of school years. Again, these are empirical questions worthy of further investigations. They are relevant as research on comprehensive school reform strategies are needed for at-risk populations (Borman et al., 2002).

Whereas this paper provides some qualitative data and a window into the cultural and practical context of Mexican primary schooling, it probably supplies more questions than answers. Questions that emerge are numerous. For example, what might the social and practical repercussions of not "cooperating" (paying annual dues to the *la escuela*) be? How might the *grupo escolar* phenomenon undermine a gifted student's opportunity

to individually succeed? What resistance might a proactive and “cooperative” parent of a child from *vespertino* school find as she strives to encourage “cooperation” and participation from other parents at the school? And more questions arise. Though these and many other questions are important and relative to the goals of this study, the amount and specificity of the data I collected are insufficient to provide answers. Through this project, I have sought to supply some descriptive information that, in my estimation, is useful to professionals who serve immigrant children from Mexican families living in the U.S. The data were collected, coded, and analyzed on the premise that the thoughtful and integrative inclusion of student cultural practices into schooling curriculum and practices impacts the student’s opportunity to achieve and succeed in school (García, 2001; Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2006). If the objective of this project was to provide qualitative information to Mexican professionals to improve services to Mexican children, data would have been gathered, coded, analyzed, and presented in a different fashion. The significant contributions this piece affords the literature are three critical categories—*el grupo escolar*, *el turno matutino vs. vespertino*, and *el comité de padres*—which hold significant influence on the cultural process of Mexican primary schooling. It is my hope that researchers will continue to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data on these and related categories so as to expand our knowledge-base of the culture and practice of Mexican public primary schooling. In addition, I hope that the information provided (as well as the provision of subsequent data on Mexican primary schooling) will be thoughtfully considered by policymakers and practitioners in order to deliberate and implement ways in which we can better meet the educational needs of Mexican immigrant children in our schools.

Further research will play a pivotal role in the respect. Qualitative and quantitative work on both sides of the border must work in the course of meaningful, shared dialogue. Critical questions need to be asked and adequate research designs can provide reliable answers. Qualitative work can provide critical categories and descriptions that set the stage and provide conceptual frameworks for inductive hypothesis testing via quantitative analyses. As the research-base increases so will our knowledge-base, and, therefore, we will be better equipped to meet the educational needs of Mexican children. At the same time, we will be more aware and better informed about educational realities of the children beyond the Southwestern border.

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Appendices

Table 1

<i>European, Hispanic , and Asian Immigrants with U.S. Total and Foreign-Born Population: 1970-2003 (in thousands)</i>					
Year	U.S. Total	U.S. Foreign-Born	U.S. Foreign-Born Populations*		
			Hispanics	Asians	Europeans
		33,500	17,856	8,375	4,590
2003	290,809	(11.7%)	(53.3%)	(25.0%)	(13.7)
		32,500	16,965	8,288	4,550
2002	288,400	(11.5%)	(52.2%)	(25.5%)	(14.0%)
		28,379	14,477	7,246	4,255
2000	281,421	(10.1%)	(51.0%)	(25.5%)	(15.3%)
		19,767	8,407	4,979	4,350
1990	248,791	(7.9%)	(42.5%)	(25.1%)	(22.0%)
		14,079	4,372	2,539	5,149
1980	226,546	(6.2%)	(31.0%)	(18.0%)	(36.6%)
		9,619	1,803	2,489	5,740
1970	203,210	(4.7%)	(18.7%)	(25.9%)	(59.6%)

* Percentages of the U.S. total foreign-born population

Sources: Gibson, C., & Lennon, E. (1999). *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-born Population of the United States*. U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office; Larsen, L. (2004). *The foreign-born population in the United States: 2003*. Current Population Reports, P20-551, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office; U.S. Census Bureau (2000). *Current Population Survey: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2000*. Ethnic and Hispanic Statistics Branch, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Table 2

Immigrant and Native Children Enrolled in K-12 Schooling in US: 1970-2000 (in thousands)

Year	K-12 Enrollment		Children of Native Parents	Total K-12 Enrollment	Percentage of Immigrant Enrollment in Total K-12 Population
	Children of Immigrants*				
	Foreign-born (1st generation)	U.S.-Born (2nd generation)			
1970	770 (24.8%)	2,334 (75.2%)	45,676	48,780	6.4%
1980	1,506 (32.2%)	3,169 (67.8%)	41,621	46,296	10.1%
1990	1,817 (31.6%)	3,926 (68.4%)	35,523	41,266	13.9%
1995	2,307 (29.2%)	5,590 (70.8%)	41,451	49,348	16.0%
2000	2,700 (25.7%)	7,800 (74.3%)	44,200	54,700	20.1%

*Percentages of total children of immigrant population

Sources: Fix, M., & Passel, J. (2003). *U.S. immigration: Trends and implications for schools*. Washington DC, The Urban Institute.; Van Hook, J., & Fix, M. (2000). A Profile of the Immigrant Student Population. In J. R. DeVelasco, M. Fix and T. Clewell (Eds.), *Overlooked and underserved: Immigrant children in U.S. secondary schools*. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.

Figure 1

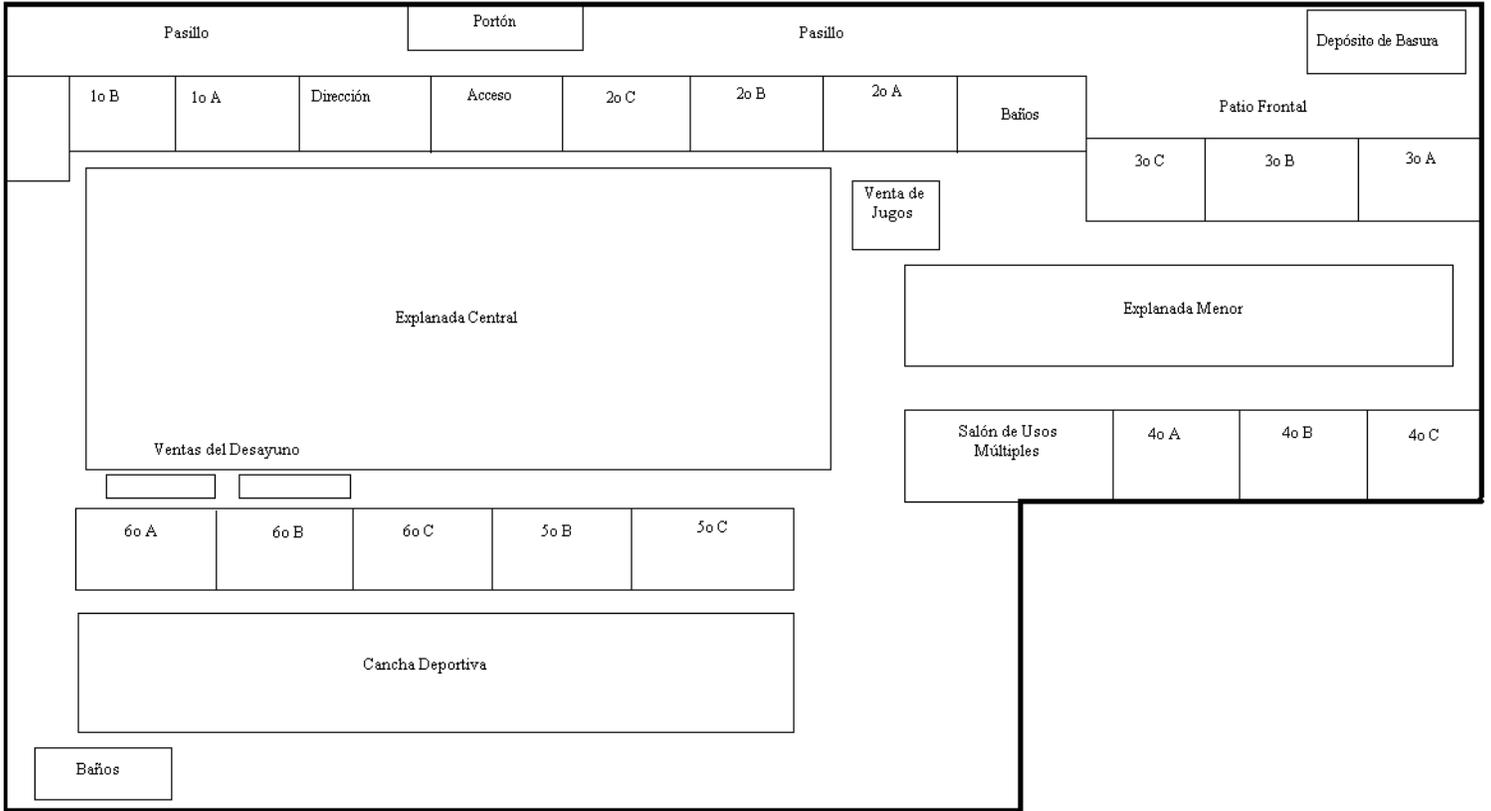


Figure 2.



Grupo 1A teacher grades children's work during class.

Figure 3.



Children in *grupo* 1B sit together a few minutes before lunch starts.

Figure 4.



Children in 6B pose together as a class (teacher is in center of photo)

Figure 5.



Sole entrance (*el portón*) to the school.

Figure 6.



Children in *grupo* 3B eat lunch together outside of their classroom.

Figure 7.



Grupo 1A teacher grades children's work during class.