Journal of Critical Study of Communication and Disability

Cioè-Peña, M. (2024). Not just a "mother," not just one child: Untangling "parental engagement" for mothers of emergent bilinguals with disabilities. *Journal of Critical Study of Communication and Disability*, 16–31. https://doi.org/10.48516/jcscd_2024vol2iss1.36

# Not Just a "Mother," Not Just One Child: Untangling "Parental Engagement" for Mothers of Emergent Bilinguals With Disabilities

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## Article Information

Keywords: Parental engagement, school-parent partnerships, students with disabilities, Latinx families, culturally and linguistically diverse learners

https://doi.org/10.48516/jcscd_2024vol2iss1.36

Submitted: March 05, 2024 EDT

Accepted: April 24, 2024 EDT

Published by Adelphi University Libraries

## Abstract

Parental involvement/engagement has been shown to increase social and academic achievement for all children, particularly for students with connections to multiply-marginalized communities. However, parental engagement discourses often fail to acknowledge or even recognize the multiple roles and identities that parents, particularly mothers, carry with them and how these roles can impact their level of engagement with/in schools. Using data gathered through a large ethnographic study of Latinx mothers who identified as monolingual Spanish users, immigrants, and mothers to EBLADs, this paper names and explores how nonschool-related interpersonal stressors impact their ability to engage and participate in their child's education. This paper also draws connections between public health issues and parental engagement. Finally, implications for policy, practice, and research are shared.

Best practices on how to support the academic needs of marginalized students, especially dually classified emergent bilinguals labeled as disabled (EBLADs) (Cioè-Peña, 2020b), remain up for debate, but the one tenet that remains universally unchallenged is that the greatest source of support for these children is their parents (Harris et al., 2009). *Parental involvement*—also referred to as *parental engagement*—has been shown to increase social and academic achievement for all children; however, definitions of *involvement* can vary based on the sociocultural positionalities of the parents, students, and school agents. Additionally, what constitutes parental engagement is often defined by hegemonic ideals that devalue the contributions of marginalized and minoritized communities. According to Mancilla et al. (2016), parental engagement is often understood as a series of school-based activities aimed at having "parents follow the school's agenda for supporting student learning at home. Examples of traditional forms of engagement and parent roles include checking homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering in the classroom" (n.p.). These forms of engagement often prioritize the capacity of White, middle-class parents who have more resources, which allows them to respond more readily to their children's needs and expectations as defined by the school. Beyond this, parental engagement discourses often fail to acknowledge or even recognize the multiple roles and identities that parents, particularly mothers, carry with them and how these roles can impact their engagement within schools.

This paper focuses on the experience of three Latinx mothers of EBLADs because, although oft-discussed, the narratives and experiences of Latinx mothers are frequently excluded from mainstream discourses around education and parental engagement. Using data gathered through a larger ethnographic study of Latinx mothers who identified as (a) monolingual Spanish users, (b) immigrants, and (c) mothers of students who are dually classified as having a disability and being an English language learner, this paper presents the ways that three focal participants name and explore different interpersonal stressors, with the goal of understanding what impact external (non-school) factors have on their ability to engage or participate in their child's education.

## The Mothers of Emergent Bilinguals Labeled as Disabled (EBLADs)

To understand the focal mothers' experiences, this section explores how the literature on family involvement in schools often disregards mothers' varying roles and relationships.

### The Parents of EBLADs: Assigned Roles and Expectations

Parental involvement[1] can increase social and academic achievement for all children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Niehaus & Adelson, 2014; Tran, 2014), including children labeled as disabled (Burke, 2013; de Apodaca et al., 2015; Spann et al., 2003; Turnbull et al., 2009). The definition of involvement for parents of a "typically developing" child can vary from simply being present and having high expectations to systematic and purposeful participation in academic life. However, for parents of children labeled as disabled, involvement goes beyond expectations, conversations, and teacher preference (Robinson & Harris, 2014; Vandergrift & Greene, 1992). For these

parents, participation requires a great deal of education about their rights as parents and their children's rights as students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) makes parental inclusion a mandated and legal obligation, highlighting the critical role of parental involvement in the academic and social success of children labeled as disabled. Under IDEA, parents are guaranteed a right to participate within/across five aspects of a child's educational career:

- Parents have the right to participate in meetings related to the evaluation, identification, and educational placement of their child.
- Parents have the right to participate in meetings related to the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to their child.
- Parents are entitled to be members of any group that decides whether their child is a "child with a disability" and meets eligibility criteria for special education and related services.
- Parents are entitled to be members of the team that develops, reviews, and revises the individualized education program (IEP) for their child. If neither parent can attend the IEP meeting, the school must use other methods to ensure their participation, including individual or conference calls.
- Parents are entitled to be members of any group that makes placement decisions for their child. If neither parent can attend the meeting where placement is decided, the school must use other methods to ensure their participation, including individual or conference calls, or video conferencing. (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2013)

These rights are designed to ensure that parents have a voice at every stage of their child's education. However, for the racialized parents of EBLADs, the level of parental involvement they exhibit can be impacted by a confluence of factors relating to their gender, race, socioeconomic status, immigration status, limited English language proficiency, and limited educational background (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; *Parental Involvement in Schools*, 2013). A perceived lack of participation under the mainstream definition of parental involvement has resulted in some research about the parents of EBLADs. The bulk of literature written about the parents of EBLADs (PoEBLADs) is framed around the experiences of mothers (Ijalba, 2015; Kim, 2013; Lee & Park, 2016; Reay, 1998; Stanley, 2013; West et al., 1998), with a particular focus on participation during the IEP meetings (Engler, 2013; Fish, 2008; Hedeen et al., 2013; Losinski et al., 2016; Montelongo, 2015; B. Orozco, 2014; Wagner et al., 2012). Most of this literature highlights how culturally and linguistically diverse mothers are unprepared to participate in the special education process.

Although PoEBLADs are often presented in relation to their socioeconomic status and their linguistic abilities, culture is also discussed in the literature. Culture is used to describe PoEBLAD's views of dis/ability and their modes of interacting. For many Latinxs, culture, by way of beliefs and rituals, has a major impact on their choices for themselves and their children. This is particularly true for (working-class, racialized) Latinx communities with clear ties to Latin American countries and cultures (e.g., recent immigrants and first-generation families). For example, many Latinx parents process their children's dis/ability through a cultural lens that leads them to believe that their child's dis/ability was/is the result of an external, nonbiological force such as mal de ojo [evil eye] or sustos [fright] (Algood et al., 2013; Blacher et al., 2013; Ijalba, 2015; Skinner et al., 1999). Additionally, a strong dependence on community and family, which relates to cultural values such as familismo/familiarismo and personalismo, plays a major role in how parents interact with their children, the school, and its representatives (Cohen, 2013; Ijalba, 2015). Culture also influences the hopes and concerns that Latinx parents have for their children labeled as disabled—including, but not limited to, transnational and cross-linguistic relationships and travel opportunities to the family's country of origin (Cioè-Peña, 2021b)—as well as who they share these intimate thoughts with (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Ijalba, 2015; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Jiménez-Castellanos et al., 2016).

## The Many Facets of Involvement

Involvement looks different to different stakeholders, but a universal ideal held by schools and researchers concerning involvement and mothers of EBLADS (MoEBLADs) is that their participation is required. As previously mentioned, IDEA grants parents the right to be active participants in their children's special education experiences. Although these rights are guaranteed, it is important to note that participation is, ultimately, the parent's choice. It is at each parent's discretion whether or not to participate and to what degree (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2013). This ambiguity, when combined with variations in cultural values, results in diverse presentations of involvement. Indeed, many MoEBLADs do not feel they have the social and cultural capital necessary to participate in the ways that IDEA suggests and that schools expect (Cioè-Peña, 2021a).

MoEBLADs consider themselves active participants in the academic lives of their children (Cioè-Peña, 2020a, 2021a). This presents a need to think outside of the standard definition of *involvement.* First, we need to consider the many ways these mothers support their children that are not always visible because they happen outside of

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1 Also referred to as *parental engagement*; both terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

school (e.g., meal preparations, drop-offs and pick-ups, procuring tutors, enrollment in extracurricular activities). And perhaps more importantly, we must consider the ways that might not be viewed as involvement based on mainstream cultural understandings (e.g., religious education, life skills training, modeling cultural norms; Gaetano, 2007; B. Orozco, 2014; G. L. Orozco, 2008; Ramirez, 2003; Ryan et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008). Indeed, as pointed out by Montelongo (2015), MoEBLADs are involved in their children’s education at the same rate as other families, but they are involved in different ways. According to Zarate (2007),

> *Latin[x] mothers equate involvement in their child’s education with involvement in their lives: participation in their children’s lives ensures that their formal schooling is complemented with educación taught in the home. Mothers believed that monitoring their children’s lives and providing moral guidance resulted in good classroom behavior, which in turn allowed for greater academic learning opportunities. Awareness of their children’s lives also led to increased trust and communication with students, and it allowed for timely intervention if a child deviated in his or her behavior. Finally, mothers felt that it was their end of an unspoken agreement with the school to holistically educate the child. (p. 9)*

This designation of home learning versus school learning is supported by the assertion that mothers view school personnel as experts in teaching and learning, thus trusting them to make decisions regarding the best educational options for their children (Cohen, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2013). MoEBLADs are very concerned with ensuring that their children are as well behaved as their typically developing counterparts (Arcia et al., 2000). This concern may relate to the fact that in most Central and South American countries, children and people with disabilities are overwhelmingly institutionalized (Cohen, 2013). Thus, if a child labeled as disabled is included in general education classrooms, they must follow the same behavioral expectations as all children. MoEBLADs also think of their involvement with their children as providing a safe home, protecting them from harmful individuals, and taking them to doctors to “cure” them of their disabilities (Ijalba, 2015). Latinx mothers are very much aware that active participation in the lives of their children results in academic gains, and many of them express a desire to be more involved in schools (Aceves, 2014; Gaetano, 2007; Montelongo, 2015; B. Orozco, 2014; G. L. Orozco, 2008; Ramirez, 2003; Rodriguez et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Wolfe & Durán, 2013).

Aside from cultural understandings of MoEBLADs’ roles as involved mothers, there are many reasons why mothers feel their participation in the lives of their children is limited to *outside* of school. Among these reasons are issues of capital, lack of confidence, mistrust, poor linguistic support, and differing cultural views. Many MoEBLADs exhibit decreased involvement because they feel that the schools are not very welcoming, do not value their voices, do not regard them as equal partners, or do not value their culturally bound perspectives (Aceves, 2014; Lalvani, 2015; Montelongo, 2015; Ramirez, 2003; Rodriguez et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008). Mothers also feel as if their needs are not sufficiently met so that they can be active participants; this refers to a lack of translators and interpreters, lack of advocacy or rights education, lack of transparency during the IEP and special education processes, and lack of concrete engagement strategies from schools (Aceves, 2014; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Additionally, mothers also point to the cultural disconnect between school representatives and themselves, which results in a lack of understanding of the goals that mothers have for their children (Wolfe & Durán, 2013).

Given the myriad factors presented, it is of little surprise that scholars have chosen to focus so heavily on increasing parent participation by asking schools to offer additional services, such as trainings that aim to increase parental knowledge/awareness of their rights in hopes of increasing parental agency. Yet this suggestion ignores the claim that mothers might not have the social capital, particularly the time, to participate more actively (Rodriguez et al., 2013). Additionally, these trainings do not mitigate the biggest factor that mothers identify as hindering their ability to participate actively within the schools: language.

According to mothers, the lack of a shared language between the home and school is one of the primary ways by which schools silence them. Mothers feel that, even with the use of translators and interpreters, their voices are not actively in the room but rather are filtered through the interpreter’s/translator’s lens or personal agenda (Wolfe & Durán, 2013). This agenda often aims to keep mothers in the role of listener rather than participant (Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Mothers identify language, both in formal and informal spaces, as “an insurmountable barrier to participation” (Zarate, 2007, p. 9). Yet their linguistic practices, needs, and experiences remain heavily underconsidered across the current literature, which does little to help mothers remedy what they see as a daunting burden.

## Theoretical Framework

Critical systems theory (Fischer-Lescano, 2012; Graham, 1999; Watson & Watson, 2011, 2013) is used here to situate the participants’ individual experiences within larger structures and systems like schools, a site that often defines parental engagement, both actively and implicitly. To address the complexity of marginalized mothers’ experiences, this framework is extended with the use of Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality (1991).

### Situating the Individual in the Systemic: Critical Systems Theory

According to Watson and Watson (2011), critical systems theory (CST) “brings a systems- thinking lens to help educational researchers understand the complex nature of educational systems and problems, while incorporating critical perspectives in both methodology and

broader research objectives such as emancipation and social justice” (p. 63). In other words, CST is the critical application of systems theory (Luhmann, 2013), the core concept of which “is one of relations between components which together comprise a whole” (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 63). Systems theory (Luhmann, 2013) could be used in this paper to help situate the mothers’ testimonios within larger educational systems and structures. Systems theory could also prevent fixation on individual experiences, which can place marginalized participants and their communities at greater risk of hypervisibility/ invisibility, and to avoid producing and/or reinforcing deficit perspectives. As such, systems theory would allow one to understand mothers’ experiences as representative and responsive to larger systems and not just their interpersonal experiences with, and/or perceptions of, school agents. Still, systems theory alone would not sufficiently address the inquiries in this study nor the needs of study participants. Thus, by “[i]ncorporating critical theory into systems analysis [CST] stresse[s] the importance of recognizing issues of power, oppression, and emancipation in systems thinking and approaches” (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 66).

Critical systems theory is guided by three core philosophies and principles: critique, emancipation, and pluralism (Watson & Watson, 2013). CST embodies critique by pushing researchers to, first, “be critical of choosing [their] methods and the underlying philosophies and theories they reflect, [and, second, to] move away from the hidden assumptions and conceptual traps in planning research to ensure that researchers do not bring existing baggage of traditional approaches into the study” (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 68). This critical lens is necessary in order to support CST’s second core principle: emancipation. CST’s “commitment to emancipatory values directs the systems researcher to recognize the barriers to human liberation: the unequal power relations and the conceptual traps that exist in real social systems that are often ignored” (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 68). As such, CST’s use in this study allows for mothers to be centered as both participants *and* stakeholders in the system (Fischer-Lescano, 2012), allowing all involved to be “working towards human emancipation and facilitating the development of full human potential through equal participation” (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 68). In other words, CST’s focus on emancipation serves as a driving force for not only the study itself but also the analysis and dissemination process because the goal is to center mothers’ testimonios as a form of equal participation in the academic discourse around parental engagement. The final tenet of CST, pluralism, calls “for an emancipation of researchers from research methodologies, and emphasizes the employment of a varying, creative design” (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 69). As such, within this study, pluralism is embodied through the use of a public health methodology, namely, participatory rank methodology (PRM; Ager et al., 2010), with the goal of centering mothers not just as stakeholders experiencing these systems (e.g., schools structures, special education systems, English learner policies) but also as members who can help correct it (Graham, 1999).

## Characterizing Systems rather than Individual Identities

CST is extended here with Crenshaw’s (1991) Black feminist theory on intersectionality as a way to understand the experiences of the multidimensional Latinx women who took part in this study—as mothers, wives, and individuals—as particular to their sociostructural positionality, which plays out in interpersonal exchanges/ encounters. Intersectionality was developed as a way to explicate the complexity of Black women’s experiences in the United States.[2] For Crenshaw, Black women’s experiences are often absorbed by activists (and social justice movements) that advocate for systemic change in response to race *or* gender inequity/oppression, but not both. As such, these disjointed approaches never address the very particular issues Black women contend with, issues that reside at the nexus of race and gender. While Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality focuses heavily on Black women, her argument is meant to support the needs of other racialized and/or racially marginalized women. At its core, intersectionality is “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class and sexuality” (Nash, 2008, p. 2). In short, intersectionality is the ideology that an individual’s experiences are not the result, nor reflective, of any singular demographic factor such as their gender, race, social class, or sexuality. Rather, their subjectivity is rooted not in the body but in the way systems interact with their bodies. For example, a participant in this study may not identify themselves as “Latina” but they and their children were/are coded as such when interacting with public agencies and social networks in the United States (e.g., schools, the census).

Intersectionality is used to extend CST and develop an intersectional CST framework (ICST) to understand how these women’s experiences result from their interactions with systems—not from their individual choices and behaviors. Thus, to fully see and understand these women as multidimensional, agentive people with complicated narratives, one must consider the multiple social, political, and personal positions they are placed in by the systems they interact with.

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2 While Crenshaw is credited with naming the term and popularizing it in modern scholarship, many scholars acknowledge that the ideas from which she derives her theory hark as far back as the 1800s as evidenced by the critical stance that Sojourner Truth put forth in her speech “Aint I a Woman” and as recently as the 1960s and 70s as evidenced by the work of bell hooks and Angela Davis (Bates, 2017; Bowleg, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

## Methodology

Before explicating the methods enacted in this study, I first want to note the epistemological stance that drove this study and paper. Namely, this paper makes use of *testimonios* (Beverley, 2009), an approach that, within this paper, is understood to be an intersectional feminist stance (Bowleg, 2012; Latina Feminist Group, 2001) that views storytelling as an inherently valuable and political act.

### The Individual as Political and Collective

*Testimonios* are concerned not only with the use of narratives as a data collection method but also with the valuing of narratives as political and intentional acts. *Testimonio* refers to the intentional and political act of telling a singular experience—or a collection of interconnected/related experiences—with the hope of exposing an injustice that is both personal and systemic (Bernal et al., 2012; Beverley, 2009; Huber, 2009b; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Passos DeNicolo & Gonzalez, 2015; Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012). *Testimonios* have a long history in Latin American politics and activism, and it is in that spirit that they are included in this study. While *testimonios* are similar to narratives, the fact that they are intentionally political as well as representative of a collective systemic issue makes them particularly relevant to the matters explored by this study and paper. Additionally, given that the focal community of this study is Latinx women of color, it is important to use a lens that is connected to storytelling as a device and to the Latin American diaspora, LatCrit, womanhood, and Chicanx/Latinx feminist theory (Bernal et al., 2012; González et al., 2003; Huber, 2009a; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Prieto & Villenas, 2012). Like intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), the importance of *testimonios* lies heavily in the epistemological understanding that a woman's experience is influenced by the multiple ways that women are positioned within larger structural systems like schools, with particular attention to gender, race, and ethnicity. As such, one's role as a mother, and one's subsequent involvement in the academic development of one's children, is also influenced by one's role as a woman, wife, laborer, and (delegitimized) citizen of a nation.

### Context

The data shared in this paper arose from of an ethnographic and qualitative study on the experiences of Spanish-speaking Latinx mothers raising emergent bilingual children with dis/abilities (Cioè-Peña, 2018, 2021a). That study was focused on understanding the impact that language and disability labels have on mothers' capacity to advocate for their children. This paper focuses on data that arose during the second phase of the study (Cioè-Peña, 2020a), which focused on three participants: Paty, Ana, and Maria (see Tables 1 and 2 under participants).

## Study Design

This study is guided by two overarching research questions:

1. How do mothers understand and/or perceive their role in their children's educational careers?
2. What factors, if any, impact a mother's capacity to engage in her children's education through “traditional” means (i.e., mainstream/academic definition of parental engagement)?

### Participants

This study is part of a larger, two-phase project that included 10 Latinx mothers who identified as monolingual Spanish users, immigrants, and mothers to children classified by school agents as both English language learners and students with disabilities (see Tables 1 and 2).

In the first phase, all 10 mothers engaged in two semi-structured interviews. For the second phase, three focal participants—Paty, Ana, and Maria—participated in at least three more interview sessions, two home observations, and a focus group. The data shared here were collected across three individual interview sessions in the second phase of the study. For methodological details about the larger study, see Cioè-Peña (2020b).

### Researcher Positionality

I identify as a neurodivergent, Afro-Dominican, Spanish-English bilingual/biliterate immigrant. After immigrating to the United States in 1990, I lived in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Sunset Park for over 20 years. I was a bilingual education student and later bilingual special education teacher in the community. I attended the same schools as many of the participants' children and attended the same church. Many of the mothers knew people who knew me through these roles. Like the women in this study, I am also a wife and mother. At the time of this study, I was married, financially dependent on my partner, a full-time student, my toddler's primary caretaker, pregnant (second trimester) with my second child, and living in a neighboring community. Since that time, I have taken on caretaking responsibilities for a parent. While I share many identity markers (past and present) with these mothers, I am different from them in that I have not had any experiences relating to spousal abuse, my children are younger (as was my marriage, compared to theirs), and my migration concerns are often assuaged by my status as a naturalized citizen of the United States.

### Data Collection

#### *Methods*

Data shared here were collected during one of three interview sessions with individual participants: this one focused on maternal stressors. As part of this interview session, mothers individually engaged in a practice called participatory rank methodology (PRM; Ager et al., 2010)

**Table 1. Case Study Participant Demographics**

| Name | Nationality | Age | Marital status | # of children | Children with IEPs | Highest level of education | Time in US (in years) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Paty** | Mexican | 40 | Married | 4; 2 in Mx, 2 in U.S. | 1 | Primary school | 11 |
| **Maria** | Mexican | 34 | Married | 2 | 2 | Professional degree | 10 |
| **Ana** | Mexican | 36 | Married | 2 | 1 | Primary school | 12 |

**Table 2. Case Study Participants’ Qualifying Child Demographics**

| Mother | Child | Age | Pronouns | Grade | Disability classification | School type | Program model |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Paty** | Dan | 10 | He/him/his | 5 | Learning disability | Public elementary | ICT |
| **Maria** | Justin | 8 | He/him/his | 3 | Autism | Public elementary | 12:1:1 |
| **Ana** | Maria Teresa | 7 | She/her/hers | 2 | Speech and language impairment | Public elementary | Bilingual ICT |

“in which a group of knowledgeable participants are guided in generating responses to a specific question or set of questions” (Ager et al., 2010, p. 1). PRM is traditionally used within public health and was introduced to education research in 2017 because it “generate[s] rich, contextualized data that can nonetheless be counted, ranked, and compared across or within groups” (Ager et al., 2010, p. 1; Cioè-Peña, 2018, 2023). Using PRM in this study is also in line with the incorporation of critical systems theory. Thus, by bringing PRM into this study, I, as the researcher, am, as Watson and Watson (2011) wrote, “attempt[ing] to emancipate [myself] from [rigid] approaches” and moving towards “using methods and striv[ing] to help position [my] personal perspectives and goals appropriately within the system” (p. 69). I am also aiming “to obtain cross-cultural understanding with stakeholders within the system, so that [I] can support the environmental compatibility of the chosen methods” and ensure that the study not only presents individual struggles but also system-wide solutions identified by the impacted stakeholders (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 69). Ultimately, I use PRM in this study to recognize mothers as “knowledgeable participants” responding to an educational question, in this case: What factors, if any, impact a mother’s capacity to engage in her children’s education through “traditional” means (i.e., mainstream/academic definition of parental engagement)? Given the focus of the larger study, prior interviews were structured around language, disability, and mothering, not parental engagement. As such, the semistructured interview questions limited the mothers’ responses to those topic areas. However, “tangential” topics, like “potential barriers to parental engagement,” showed up across the interviews and were seemingly hiding under the surface all along. For a more robust description of PRM as a method for educational research, see Cioè-Peña (2023).

### *Procedures*

In the first session, each participant was given a minimum of 3 minutes to explore and list all her responsibilities, and then she was asked to rank these by order of importance. Although the mothers were not explicitly asked to explain the list or the rank, they all volunteered this information. Next, each participant was given an additional 3 minutes (as a minimum) to explore and list all her worries and concerns. Each mother was then asked to organize this list in order of intensity from most concerning to least. Lastly, participants were asked to talk about the things that worry them and how those impact their abilities and experience as mothers. When needed, probing questions were asked regarding their child’s dis/ability, bilingualism, and overall education.

The data presented here originated from the fifth interview, after months of contact with the participants. This fifth interview was done in order to open up the discursive space to each mother’s interests and, as such, understand what impact external factors had on their ability to engage and/or participate in their child’s education. Although PRM is often conducted in group settings, in this study the mothers were interviewed individually to respect their privacy and to maximize their sense of empowerment and autonomy within the study. As such, the data that resulted from the individual interviews, in keeping with *testimonios*, can be understood as both an intentional political act *and* as indicators of a collective experience. The validity of the individual story as emblematic of the collective experience (i.e., as representative of more

than just *that* mother) was confirmed during the data analysis phase.

### *Data Analysis*

The individual interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated as needed. The resulting data were interpreted using thematic and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). These were then coded and interpreted with the guidance of thematic and structural analysis (Riessman, 2008). After comparing the audio recordings with the transcripts and listening for accuracy, ensuing rounds of analysis were guided by different purposes. As part of the larger study, the data were part of primary rounds of analysis that approached the data as *testimonios*. Honoring speaker agency and intentionality, transcripts were not corrected for grammar or edited for clarity. Additionally, deductive codes were developed based on what topics mothers chose to foreground (e.g., children abroad, elder care) that felt juxtaposed to the predictions or assumptions embedded in the study design (i.e., expected responses included but were not limited to issues relating to language, disability, and interactions with school agents). As part of this primary round, changes in voice or emotional tone, which were understood as varying indications of engagement and comfort, were also noted. In order to surface findings on parental engagement, the data underwent secondary analysis as outlined here. The first round was guided by the first research question and made use of deductive codes that arose from the mothers' narratives (e.g., complex roles as women and mothers, limited capital/resources, communication gaps). The second round was driven by inductive codes stemming from the second research question (e.g., school-based barriers to participation, social barriers to participation). A third round of analysis looked at the findings across participants to identify common experiences and shared themes. This round of analysis, like the foundational one, was necessary in order to assert that these women's individual and collective experiences are reflective not of the interpersonal dynamics at play but of the institutional structures women like them interact with (Bernal et al., 2012). The findings were then categorized by emergent themes. Anchored in the theoretical framework, a fourth round of analysis focused on ideas and phrases that indicated which parts of these experiences occurred at the individual and/or systemic level; attention was given to ideas and phrases that presented issues that felt distinct or particular to mothers with shared positionalities engaging with systems that lack intersectional approaches/considerations. The fifth and final round of analysis was dedicated to free listening, during which interesting comments, contradictions, or inconsistencies made by the participants were noted and marked. Three of the themes that arise from the analysis are shared in the next section.

## Findings

The first finding in this paper focuses on the seeming *disconnect* between the original study and the findings that, ultimately, illuminated matters of importance that were relevant to the original study but were not within the purview of the original research design. The second finding presents the connections mothers make between their stressors and their parental engagement capacities/behaviors. The third and final finding presents how mothers found relief from their heavily taxed time and attention by disengaging from traditional means of engaging with their children's schooling (i.e., PTA meetings, events *at* school).

### Disconnected Discussions: What does trauma have to do with parental engagement?

By the time PRM was enacted in the larger study, participants had already engaged in four interviews, two as part of the larger study and two as part of the case studies. At this point, many of the participants' concerns were documented as relating to immigration, marriage, and health. However, these seemed like secondary or tangential issues that, at first, were difficult to understand. These same themes would come up during the PRM session as well. Once again, at the onset of the session, it was unclear how these matters related to children's educational experiences. Additionally, missing were traditional topics, or at least researcher-anticipated topics, like schooling, language, disability, or bilingual education. My expectation that these topics would present themselves originated from the larger study's research design and research questions as shown in Figure 1.

However, after engaging in a PRM-guided session, the mothers revealed that there was a connection between the concerns they found pressing and the concerns that I expected to surface during this study (See figure 2).

During the initial part of the PRM process, after the warm-up, mothers were asked "to think of all the things that you are worried about right now. All your concerns—they can be concerns that directly impact you, your partner, your children, your family. List them" (Appendix). Once again, mothers listed factors that are not often considered within discourses relating to parental engagement; these included concerns about their own well-being (e.g., mental health challenges, marital strife), their other children (i.e., sexual trauma, addiction, medical concerns), and family members (e.g., caring for elderly parents and/or younger siblings). See Figure 3.

After developing their list, the mothers were asked to expand on these concerns, with the following questions serving as guides: Talk to me about what worries you? How does this impact your ability to be/experiences as a mother? It was at this point that the mothers revealed the very deep connections between their concerns, their ability to care for their EBLAD child, and their level of parental engagement. In these discussions, as will be elaborated on across the second and third findings, mothers shared the ways in which their nonschool-

**Table 3. (Larger Study) Research questions and Preliminary Themes Concerning Parental Engagement**

| Research Questions | Top themes evident after 5 interviews | Top themes absent after 5 interviews |
|---|---|---|
| 1. What are the mothering[1] experiences of Spanish-speaking Latinx mothers of emergent bilingual children labeled dis/abled?<br>2. What values, perspectives and ideologies[2] do mothers hold about bilingualism and dis/abilities and how are those reflected in their lives at home and at school? | • Immigration<br>• Marital woes<br>• Physical health | • Relationship with school<br>• Child's disability<br>• Bilingualism or issues relating to language learning and communication |

[1] Mothering: According to Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1994), mothering is

> "a historically and culturally variable relationship 'in which one individual nurtures and cares for another.' Mothering occurs within specific social contexts that vary in terms of material and cultural resources and constraints. How mothering is conceived, organized and carried out is not simply determined by these conditions, however. Mothering is constructed through men's and women's actions within specific historical circumstances" (p.3).

[2] Ideology is a fixed set of beliefs, attitudes and opinions that underline one's understanding of abstract concepts such as dis/ability and bilingualism (Brooker, 2003). For example, ideology is reflected in the way one views dis/ability, either through the medical model, which views physical and mental difference as a deviation from the norm, or through a dis/abilities studies perspective, which views dis/ability as the social construction of human variety as deficit rather than an inherent difference.

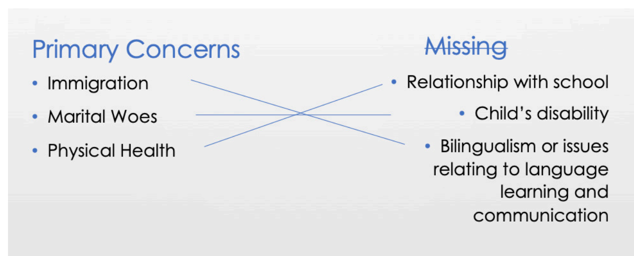


**Figure 1. Relationship Between Evident Themes and Missing Themes**

Note: [Image description] Chart with two columns. The left column says primary concerns, the right column has the word "Missing" crossed out. Under "primary concerns" are the following listed words: immigration, marital woes, physical health. Under "Missing" are the following listed terms: Relationship with school, Child's disability, Bilingualism or issues relating to language learning and communication. There are lines connecting bullets from the left to right column. Immigration connects to bilingualism; marital woes to child's disability; and, physical health with relationship with school.

related concerns—including, but not limited to, caretaking demands and immigration fears—limited their ability to be more physically present at school. In the first finding, we look at how school agents' and policymakers' positioning of mothers solely as parents to the EBLAD child conflicts with reality.

## Integrated Lives: One Role Impacts the Other

The mothers' immigration concerns led them to worry about being deported and what would happen to their kids in their home country without bilingual resources and without the educational supports required to address their disability-related needs. These fears resulted in decreased parental engagement *at* school due to the prevalence of immigration raids around school grounds during the Trump administration's enactment of immigration reforms (Villazor & Johnson, 2019), as the following excerpt reveals:

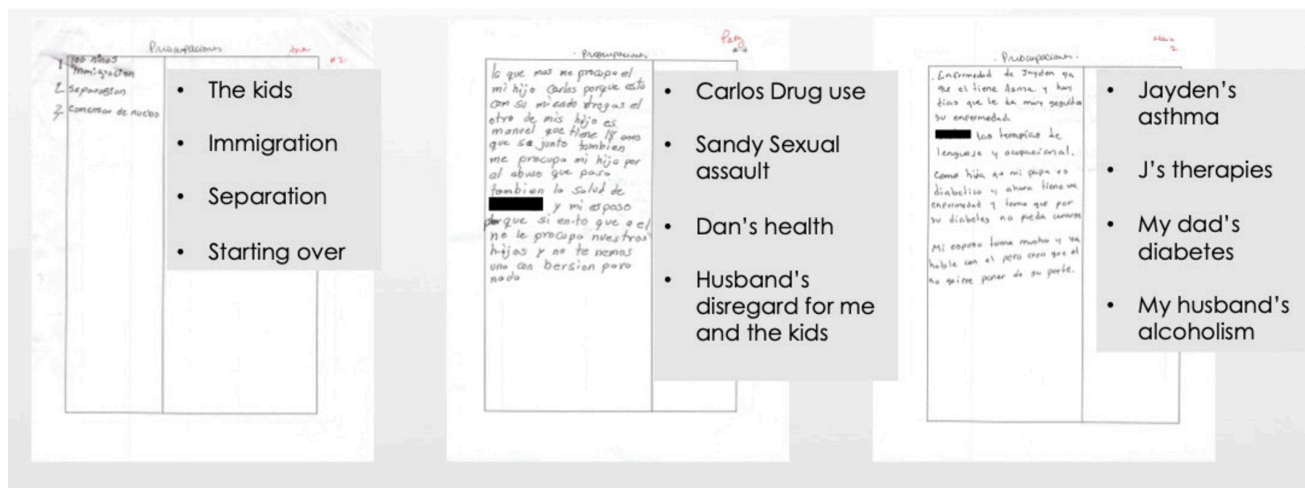


**Figure 2. Mothers' Notes from PRM Session**

Note: [Image description] Close up of three pieces of paper with writing on them. Each paper has typed bulleted notes within a hovering box. Left box: The kids, Immigration, Seperation, Starting over. Middle box: Carlos drug use, Sandy sexual assault, Dan's heath, Husband's disregard for me and the kids. Right box: Jayden's asthma, J's therapies, My dad's diabetes, My husband's alcoholism.

> [*It’s recent, since the president entered, because he is fulfilling what he is saying. And I think that he is, he is already beginning to comply, because there are people who are already grabbing them. [...] The current concern is that of immigration, in case they come to catch the father or me, my children do not have a passport [...] If they catch me and I leave, I will take them, because I understand that here they go through the city [child welfare], and the city keeps them [foster care], if there is no one to claim them. [...]. And second, well, the separation a little, but I don’t think about it so much about the separation, because if in case my husband was caught, as they say at work they are grabbing, I as soon as they grab him, there in Mexico, I’m leaving, [...]. But the third is to start over, more mainly because [for] us it is not so much of a difference, because we were born there, [...]But a little different for the children, because they have been here, they have grown up, it is very different from there.[...]. But for now the biggest concern is immigration*.]

Here, Ana explains her four concerns—her children, immigration, separation, and starting over (see the left box in Figure 3)—and how these concerns impact her capacity to mother her children, both at home and at school. She is highly concerned about being deported not just because it could result in separation from her family but also because it would introduce huge changes to the lives of her children, who have only known life in the United States. As such, immigration was not a distant concern but one that was closely related to her capacity to engage in traditional forms of parental involvement, both physically and mentally (Cioè-Peña, 2021b).

The mothers also elaborated on how their marriages impacted their abilities to care for their children, both at home and at school. Their marriages were impacted by affairs, alcoholism, and domestic violence (Cioè-Peña, 2021a) as well as by the fact that the mothers were the sole and/or primary parent caring for their disabled child(ren):

> [*[B]eing alone I had to care for my children. Because my husband worked every day. And, the truth, on weekends he drank. So, do the math right now, like this, in cold times, I would lock myself up. I locked myself in that I didn’t go out at all, other than to the store for what I needed to cook. That’s it. I felt that, at that time, I felt that I was alone - I was pressuring myself. I don’t know, I felt so bad. And I would say to my husband, “this weekend I want to go to such and such place,” and he would tell me, “yes, I am taking you.” “But let’s go”. “I just can’t go out with the two children [alone].” But the weekend would come and I would be locked up again, because he arrived drunk.]*

In this excerpt, Paty, who was caring for four children across two countries, expresses her frustration with caring for two children alone and how marital tensions and alcoholism affected her ability to engage with her children in the ways she wanted to. This mother also expressed frustration with being the only parent who participated in school events, a frustration shared by almost every mother in the larger study.

The mothers were worried about their children missing school as a result of their physical health. They also worried about not being able to be as involved in their children’s schooling as a result of needing to care for their own health needs and those of other relatives. In the following excerpt, a mother reflects on how her child’s disability needs impacted her own well-being:

> [*I have not had a medical check-up for a long time, it’s been since Jayden was born, it was the last day, the last check-up that I had. There are times when I do feel bad, [...]*
> *Sometimes I feel ill, sometimes I don’t know if I have diabetes or not, because sometimes I feel, like, I feel shaky and stuff. [...] Three years ago, four years ago, I also suffer from asthma, I had my asthma attack, I went to the hospital that day, and I had to leave my children to be able to go to the hospital, because I could no longer breathe. And [my husband] could never ask permission to have the children while I went to the doctor. I had to find my friend to take care of them and go to the doctor.]*

Here, Maria explains how her health concerns are secondary to caring for her children because she is unable to rely on her partner for childcare or emotional support. As a result, it had been at least six years since she had had a routine check-up, even though she has a history of asthma and a family history of diabetes. Not only was this mother taxed, but she had minimal support to turn to as she was an isolated immigrant in the United States, her extended family was still living in her country of origin, and her husband, as the sole financial provider, worked long hours. This isolation resulted in a lack of engagement outside of the home, particularly with her children’s school. Her isolation is also emblematic of the intensity of the care work this mother was taking on and her commitments to her children, as evidenced by her prioritizing her children’s wellbeing above her own.

Connections between these mothers’ concerns and their children’s education were revealed using probing questions relating to the study focus: (a) Where does your child’s disability fall? (b) Where does your child’s bilingualism fall? (c) Where does your child’s educational achievement fall? The mothers’ responses to these questions are taken up in the following sections. Their answers indicate that, for many, the child with the disability is the least of the mothers’ concerns because that child has their own support network.

## Stability, a Welcome Reprieve

Given the oppressive structures that families encounter when a student has a disability, many would assume that a child with a disability would be the most pressing stressor in the mothers’ lives; however, at least one mother was able to name one positive impact their child’s school-based disability classification had: additional support. In her interview, Paty named several stressors that she was contending with, including, but not limited to, caretaking children across two nation-

states. When asked, "Where then does Dan's disability fall, or is it not a concern for you?" Paty responded with:

> [*Well, right now, yes, it is a concern that he does not get worse. And at the same time, it is not so important right now, because he is stable. Yes, I am concerned about his studies, as well as Sandra's too, I don't know. But right now what is sometimes in my head right now for me is my son Carlos Santo, that is what sometimes worries me more. [...] That they have me here, of course, not 24 hours because I work too, but they also go to school and there he has a team that takes care of him. [...] And yet with [Carlos] no, with both of them, because they are only on the phone.*]

In this passage, Paty captures the complex realities these mothers experience and the tough decisions they must make. Paty's list of concerns did not include her U.S.-born children's education. Instead, she was worried about the wellbeing of her son Carlos, who was living in Mexico and whom she had not seen in over 10 years (Cioè-Peña, 2021b); her daughter's recovery from interpersonal sexual violence; the health of her dually classified son, Dan; and her marriage. These were all topics that Paty had alluded to in her previous interviews but was able to expand on in the PRM session. Still, being asked about where her son's disability and schooling fell allowed her to share how these other demands were more urgent and how the school-based disability-related supports that Dan accessed at school also offered her an opportunity to tend to other concerns. This approach is reflective of Latinx cultural values that position teachers as surrogate parents. Still, the framing of a child with a disability as stable is important in understanding how mothers engage at schools. Here, Paty indicates that she views Dan's individual education plan (IEP) team not as a sign of urgency but rather as a sign of stability. Even though Paty worried about Dan's academic growth, he was the one child with whom she felt she had a team she could rely on for support—a team that could tend to his academic needs. Thus, what may appear to Dan's teachers as a lack of engagement on Paty's part is revealed to be confidence in the school system and a reflection of a mother's constant balancing act.

## Discussion

Presentations of parents as disengaged continue to permeate educational research because said research tends to position caretakers in relation to the child—and the care work they are tasked with—rather than their own personhood. Because of this positioning, discussions of parental engagement are often devoid of parents' other relational identities (e.g., spouse, child, sibling, friend). Moreover, using intersectionality and a critical systems theory lens, we see that parents are compartmentalized in their roles and relationships with school communities, with little consideration for how their nonschool-rooted positioning impacts their ability to participate and/or engage with the school in traditional ways.

In the first finding, "Disconnected Discussions," we can see how shifting the structure of the interactions allowed mothers to reveal issues that, from the researcher's perspective, felt tangential to the study but were extremely relevant to the mothers' capacity to engage in their focal child's education through traditional means. Looking at this through an intersectional critical systems theory (ICST) framework, we can see how, given that the inclusion criteria into the larger study centered on a woman's positionality as a mother to a dually-classified child, the original study design also perceived "mother" as a singular role devoid of relation to others beyond the child and the school. An ICST framework allowed me to understand how questions that related solely to the mothers in relation to school limited their capacity to fully share their experiences. However, enacting PRM using a testimonio stance allowed me to uncover things that had been alluded to (e.g., immigration concerns, marital stress, other children's needs) and center them in the discourse. This indicates that when parents, particularly mothers, are included in educational studies, they are positioned in a singular role in relation to one system. This approach does not account for how other social systems, such as healthcare and child welfare, along with ideological systems like ableism, racism, poverty, and patriarchy, restrict these mothers' capacity to engage fully in their children's academic experiences. It also limits their ability to express the challenges and barriers they face, thus limiting what is presented in the scholarship.

In the second finding, "Integrated Lives: One Role Impacts the Other," we see the convergence of multiple systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991) that the mothers are living within, and we learn of their particular impact and connection to parental engagement. For example, Ana spoke about how the criminalization of migration limited her capacity to engage with her children's school out of fear of deportation. This fear stems from the reality that school is a place where many parents encounter social systems that are rooted in criminalizing people of particular positionalities (e.g., poor, undocumented, Black and Brown people) and motivated by oppressive values (e.g., xenophobia, capitalism, policing). As such, we cannot truly assess marginalized parents' engagement without considering the very real risk that such participation would introduce to the family. Maria and Paty revealed how a lack of social networks/supports (e.g., physical and mental health care) for marginalized women resulted in them enduring complex interpersonal relationships and deep personal suffering. An ICST framework allows us to see and understand mothers as whole and complex beings. Therefore, the mothers were able to express that their lack of school presence is not related to a lack of interest or desire but rather a lack of availability and resources. As such, it is important that when assessing a parent's level of engagement, educators and researchers consider how social positionality impacts opportunity and capacity. As previously stated, much of the literature accounts for positionality markers but, most often, these are used to attribute deficiencies

to that demographic, be they Latinx mothers, mothers living in poverty, and so on, rather than attributing any fault to the systems they interact with, like schools, and how people are treated by those systems.

Finally, in the third finding, "Stability, a Welcome Reprieve," we learned how Paty perceived her child's individual education plan team and service providers as surrogate parents at school (i.e., Dan's caretakers at school), thus allowing her to take a step back from that child to focus on her other children as well as her own marital and healthcare needs. Using an ICST framework, we can understand what is viewed as parental disengagement from a unique perspective, one where the mothers put their trust in school agents, indicating a level of confidence in and connection to the IEP team and service providers. However, in previous work (Cioè-Peña, 2020a, 2021a), I have documented how these mothers felt oppressed when interacting with school agents, even within predominantly Latinx schools, across the special education evaluation, placement, and IEP development processes. As such, it is possible that after so many experiences of being pushed out of her child's academic experiences, on account of the presence of a disability, Paty had a decreased sense of confidence and belonging at school. Ultimately, these experiences could have led her to turn over surveillance of her dually classified child's educational development to the special education "experts," allowing her to shift her energies to her other children, who do not have "teams" of service providers tending to their academic growth. Intersectionality is often (mis)used to explicate individual experiences along varying markers; however, by extending CST with intersectionality here, attention is given not just to how the individual experiences the systems, thus resulting in decreased engagement, but also how the educational systems and structures fault parents (for their perceived absence) rather than recognizing the multiplicity of their needs and supporting them (so they can be more present).

## Implications

A great deal of recent scholarship aims to understand the experiences of marginalized communities, but the focus has remained squarely on children and schools. As such, an opportunity to learn from and support parents—especially mothers—is missed. Often Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is used in education scholarship to understand the different ways that multiply marginalized people are oppressed in society. But when the focus remains on what happens in schools and on classrooms, we run the risk of essentializing mothers, and by extension families, without placing their experiences within the larger systems that are at work both ideologically (e.g., white supremacy, patriarchy, colonialisms) and structurally (e.g., education, health care, poverty). As such, several implications arise from this study across policy, practice, and research contexts. These implications arise from the mothers' own words and suggest their desire for change and their vision for a better, more supportive future.

### Implications for Policy

The mothers in this study clearly communicated a sense of being overwhelmed and their limited capacity to negotiate all their care responsibilities while still meeting the expectations of parental involvement/engagement set forth by their children's schools. As such, educators and policymakers must, first and foremost, advocate for intersectional policies that support the multiplicity of mothers' lived experiences. For example, the mothers in this study shared the ways in which immigration concerns kept them from their children's school. Therefore, school agents should advocate for schools to be safe havens for mixed-status families. In order to ensure that parents have the capacity to engage in the ways schools want and need, we must ensure that their lives are stable, which includes making sure families have access to medical care, safe housing, and economic stability, to name a few. Beyond this, we need to develop educational policies that understand that "parent" is only one among many identities and roles; as such, educational policies like IDEA that name parents as stakeholders must be explicit about how parents need to be supported for them to meet engagement expectations. In other words, if parents are required to be present at individual education plan meetings, how are schools accounting for the parents' missed time for work, transportation costs, and childcare for younger children in the home? To this end, IDEA must ensure that parents are afforded every avenue to engage; this includes but is not limited to ensuring that mothers have free and safe transportation and childcare options. While not explicitly mentioned, these factors would reduce both the caretaking and financial burden that is placed on families when asked to engage in school-based activities. A seat at the table is not enough to ensure equitable participation (Cioè-Peña, 2020a).

### Implications for Practice

One thing that parents need is more communication. Lack of communication and assumptions on the part of the school have been named as major stressors and barriers for marginalized parents, particularly for the parents of multiply-classified learners (Cioè-Peña, 2022). Schools seeking to increase parental engagement should reach out to their local parent communities to seek out suggestions on how best to support families. Case in point, as part of their participation in the larger study, Ana, Paty, and Maria met together and once again took part in an interview session guided by participatory rank methodology in order to develop recommendations for their local school communities. The top three recommended/requested supports were mental health supports for mothers, behavioral management training for parents, and for the school to provide school supplies at low or no cost. These were identified as the supports

that would be most effective and impactful; the full list of recommendations was previously published in Cioè-Peña, 2021a. Parents' needs will, of course, vary by community, so the key is for school agents to seek out local needs in order to maximize their impact and support.

### Implications for Research

Prior works have documented the need for scholarship to (a) redefine parental involvement (López et al., 2001) and (b) showcase mothers as highly engaged, critical members of their children's educational careers *and* as complex, overtaxed beings (Cioè-Peña, 2020a, 2021a). Still, this paper—as well as the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and remote schooling of 2020 and 2021—shows that there is a major link between people's social and educational environments as well as a clear connection across public health and public education crises. As such, I invite education scholars to explore public health research for methodologies, like PRM, but also to stay informed on factors that may seem beyond the scope of school but have a significant impact on parents' capacity and agency. Furthermore, educational scholarship needs to be situated within larger ideological and structural systems in order to fully address the needs of students and their families. At this moment, families are being led by adults who are managing expectations at home, work, school, and society at large, all of which influence their ability to be (fully) present in any space, including the research setting.

## Conclusion

According to Doepke et al. (2019), "child rearing or parenting refers to everything parents do to support the development of their children, from basics such as providing food and shelter to guiding their emotional and intellectual development" (p. 1). This is true, of course, but parenting and the labor it entails (i.e., parental engagement/involvement) is heavily influenced by many factors beyond children (e.g., education, finances, ability, race, geographic location). For example, "[i]n the 1970s, low- and high-educated parents [in] the United States spent about the same time on childcare. [By 2019], there [was] a gap of more than three hours per week between more and less educated parents," with more educated parents having more time available to spend on "education-related child care activities" (Doepke et al., 2019, p. 65). From this information, we can safely assume that if parents with varying degrees of formal education have varying amounts of time to spend on/with their children, then they will also have varying opportunities for parental engagement. As such, we must move discussions relating to parental engagement from the individual and *cultural* to the systemic. Otherwise, in continuing to make associations between parental engagement and individual/cultural characteristics (i.e., identity markers and superlatives), we reinforce and reproduce deficit perspectives of parents who are living in oppressive conditions by, first, ignoring the impact these oppressions have on their capacities to support/advocate for their children and then, second, blaming their "absence" for their children's academic shortcomings.

Current mainstream discourses around parenting encourage all parents to take on, in embodiment and behavior, the values and ways of moving in the world of white, middle-class, English monolingual parents. In essence, these practices have become synonymous with "good" parenting practices (Cioè-Peña, 2021a; Robinson & Harris, 2013, 2014). However, the reality is that the ideological and structural systems that influence quotidian life were established, developed, and managed to support white, middle-class, English monolingual people; thus, parents who fit those categories have ample opportunities to engage with their children and the systems their children interact with like schools. Furthermore, these parents also have the opportunity to serve as their children's "attachment figure."[^5] A parent's role as "an attachment figure is one of the most important in predicting [a] child's later social and emotional outcome" (Benoit, 2004, p. 541), including educational outcome. As such, without interrogating the larger systems at play, we may not recognize how these systems explicitly and actively support the power majority in parenting their children while marginalized communities are explicitly encouraged but systematically undermined. These obstacles set up marginalized parents to detach from their children educationally, intellectually, ideologically, and ultimately, physically.

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