

Madres Líderes:
Empowering Our Families and Community

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By Jacqueline Gamboa

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Jacqueline Gamboa

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The Undersigned Graduate Committee Approves the Project Report Titled

Madres Líderes:

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by

Jacqueline Gamboa

Approved for the Department of Anthropology

Dr. Roberto Gonzalez, Department of Anthropology

Date

Dr. Chuck Darrah, Department of Anthropology

Date

Dr. Jennie Luna, Department of Mexican-American Studies

Date

Abstract

This project report examines how *Las Campeonas de la Salud*, a community-university partnership between the San Jose State University Health Science Department and the McKinley Elementary School, has affected the participants' lives, families, and community. Utilizing seven months of participant-observation and ten semi-structured interviews, I discuss the history, role, and relationship of this partnership. Aurora García, the principal, is a key figure in facilitating resources to the school and advocating for parent-school partnerships, while Dr. Roe, chair of the Health Science Department, seeks to establish a long-term relationship with the community. *Las Campeonas* was formed in 2008 and in addition to health education workshops and events, the group has developed sustainable leadership roles. *Madres líderes* (mother-leaders) illustrate how their childhoods and motherhoods have molded their perceptions of family, immigration, education, and community organizing. The *madres líderes* are redefining leadership, so that any one can develop the skills to organize and coordinate workshops for the community. The most successful outcome of the women's leadership is the influence it has had on their children, who are following in their footsteps and becoming leaders themselves.

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Las Campeonas, I hope that this project serves you and your community because I have learned many lessons from your leadership and relationships. Thank you for sharing your stories with us and for always giving us a warm welcome.

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Introduction

My project thesis focuses on parent involvement, gender, and leadership among Latina immigrant mothers within the public educational system. *Las Campeonas de la Salud* (The Champions of Health) is a community-university partnership between the San Jose State University Health Science Department and the McKinley Elementary School that educates and empowers women to build strong, resilient families and communities through health education. The partnership formed in 2008 and has grown rapidly since its inception, yet its story remains untold.

The aim of my project is to document the history of *Las Campeonas de la Salud* and the relationship and role of the community-university partnership. I examine the ways in which the health science department and McKinley community each contribute to the unique model and design of this partnership. In addition, I explore ways in which *Las Campeonas* has impacted the participants' lives, families, and community.

Secondly, I collect the oral histories of *madres líderes* (mother-leaders) in *Las Campeonas* who have cultivated leadership and civic engagement at McKinley. There are two main objectives: 1) to examine how the *madres líderes*' childhoods, motherhoods, and schooling experiences shaped their ideas and practice of leadership; and 2) to analyze the dynamics of leadership among the immigrant women. In recognizing the everyday contributions of ordinary mothers, I hope to inspire and pass on a legacy of community activism.

I collaborated with two graduate students, Adela Lúa and Sabrina Dueñas, in the San Jose State University Anthropology Department; Dr. Kathleen Roe, chair of the Health Science Department, and *Las Campeonas*. Dr. Roe invited our graduate team to

conduct an ethnographic evaluation of how the group came into being and what future lies ahead. The research project was open and flexible, since *Las Campeonas* also had a voice and decision in the matter. In exchange, the women wanted a book and film documentation to use as an informative resource for the community about the group's development and programs. Our projects emerged from meetings and conversations with the stakeholders. My colleagues selected the film and evaluation project, while I felt strongly inclined to carry out the ethnographic story about *Las Campeonas* and women leaders.

Structure of This Project Report

My project thesis is organized in three parts. The first part explores literature on the development of Latino parental involvement from parents who “undervalue education” to parent-school partnerships where they take on leadership positions. The second part is an overview of *Las Campeonas*' history and the development of the community-university partnership. I discuss the role of each stakeholder and the contributions it brings to the group. My focus is on leadership building and how it influences change within the educational system and in the community. The third part consists of oral histories of two outstanding *madres lideres* who have been transformed by their participation with *Las Campeonas*. This section examines the factors that have shaped their leadership from childhood to motherhood. I also examine how women and mother activists' involvement develop through community grassroots organizations and parent support groups. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes my findings regarding parent involvement, gender, and leadership in the schools and communities, and how they tie

into *Las Campeonas de la Salud*. I have included recommendations for the community-university partnership and *Las Campeonas* to improve their structure and continuity.

Part I

Latina Mothers: From Involvement to Empowering Leaders

Latino Parent Involvement

According to the 2010 United States Census Bureau, Latinos are the fastest growing minority, making up 16 percent of the population (50.5 million people). Yet despite this demographic shift, Latinos' academic performance lags far behind that of other ethnic groups. One source states, "Based on the rate of improvement from 2003-2009, it would take up to 105 years to close the white/Hispanic achievement gap" (Tucker 2009). This figure could increase or decrease depending on the efforts used to improve and assist students. However, examining the educational attainment of students with high school diplomas is worrisome. The National Center for Educational Statistics (Chapman et al. 2011) indicates that Latinos have the highest high school drop out rate, 17.6 percent. Nevertheless, this is not a new phenomenon because Latino students have persistently had higher high school drop out rates and lower academic performance than white students.

Since the early 1930s, social scientists have been interested in the low test scores and underperformance of Latino children. These early investigations led to theories of biological and cultural deficiencies that often blamed parents for inheriting poor genes and devaluing education (Vaca 1970; Delgado-Gaitan 1992). Nick Vaca describes how psychologists played a significant role in "providing the scientific evidence for shifting the cause of the genocide of the intellect of generations of Mexican American children from the shoulders of guilty educational institutions onto the Mexican-American himself" (1970: 18). Researchers contributed to these early assumptions of cultural deficiency that were detrimental to Latino families.

Notions of cultural deficiency continue to influence school administrators and teachers' beliefs and attitudes about Latino parents. Although they are not as visible, they persist and affect the way parents are treated in the schools. Latino parents are often perceived to be uninterested in their children's education and to undervalue it because they are not involved and engaged in their children's schooling (Olivos 2004; Jasis and Ordonez-Jasis 2004-2005). Educators sometimes suggest that parents' lack of involvement negatively affects children's performance and is a representation of parents' indifference toward education. However, as Delgado-Gaitan points out, "the absence of appropriate sociocultural knowledge precludes acceptable participation in formal school activities, resulting in isolation for many parents, especially those who have not been schooled in the United States and who are limited in English proficiency" (1991:21). She speaks about immigrant parents who have not accumulated the skills to navigate these institutions. At the same time, she also shifts the focus to institutions whose cultural practices marginalize parents from participating. As Edward Olivos points out, "while a teacher or administrator may claim 'good intentions' in their treatment of Latino parents, their actions may in fact demonstrate underlying racist assumptions" (2004:31). Few studies have focused on the racism and discrimination that stem from cultural deficiency theories that are still common in U.S. institutions.

Nevertheless, immigrant families are expected to follow dominant beliefs and practices of parent involvement. Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis (2004-2005:33) state, "the concept of parent involvement is a social construct whose boundaries and expectations are impacted by culture, race, class and gender issues, [and] there are also competing notions of what constitutes parent involvement among the various stakeholders in the

school community.” Therefore, immigrant parents who do not adapt to these social boundaries will have to create a space where it is acceptable to incorporate a different understanding of parent involvement.

Carreón et al. (2005) demonstrate how Latino immigrant parents facilitate their participation in the schooling of their children through their presence as a form of involvement. In this study, the researchers developed “ecologies of parental engagement” to explain how parents’ experiences and resources redefine parent involvement. They examined the cultural capital of parents, defined as the “material resources, social networks, beliefs and personal life orientations on which people draw to direct their actions” (Carreón et al. 2005:468). The label “strategic helper” is given to a parent whose presence is within the boundaries of the school. Although the parent maintains a high level of participation at school events and meetings, he or she is excluded from the decision making. Thus, the parent creates a space in the classroom to volunteer and help the teacher in such a way as to assist rather than co-facilitate. Another possible role is the “questioner” in which parents are involved outside of the classroom. They transmit to their children the value of education and continue to participate at school events and meetings, but they maintain a minimal role at the school. The parents communicate with other parents and individual teachers in his or her social network to learn how the school functions. Lastly, there is the role of the “listener” which refers to a parent who participates informally. The parent disassociates from the school because he or she is unknowledgeable about the educational system and has experienced hostility from staff and administrators. Under these circumstances, the parent engages in his or her children’s schooling by communicating with them on a daily basis about his or her experiences. For

instance, Isabel, a recent immigrant, disturbed by her daughter's teacher, the principal's unresponsiveness, and unfamiliarity with the educational system was forced to step away from the school environment. Yet, Isabel remained involved in her daughter's schooling by communicating about her every day classroom experiences. The commitment and persistence of Latino immigrants in the educational system regardless of negative experiences is illustrated through their presence and participation in formal and informal activities.

There are also an increasing number of parent-school partnerships used to facilitate communication and inform families about how to navigate the educational system. Jasis and Ordóñez- Jasis (2004-2005) document the emergence of an immigrant Latino parent-led project, *La Familia Initiative*, which strives for improving the academic success of students and establishing a partnership with the school. The researchers conducted two years of participant observations and more than two hundred hours of interviews at North Side Middle School in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Latino parents in the study organized the initial meetings with the intention of building *confianza* (trust) among parents through *convivencias* held in Spanish and without school staff. *Convivencia* refers to “the flowing moments of collective creation and solidarity, the bonding that developed from a joint, emerging moral quest against the back-drop of experiential sharing” (Jasis and Ordóñez- Jasis 2004-2005:35). The *convivencias* were significant spaces where parents gained the confidence to challenge power structures as well as create relationships with other parents by sharing their experiences of injustice and discrimination. As a result, the groups' first community meeting was attended by 112 families who discussed the needs of the students and school. The teachers and school

staff complained about Latino parent's lack of involvement and yet, *La Familia Initiative* was able to organize the parent group and create a list of suggestions for improving the school. A follow up meeting was coordinated and the results were presented to the principal and school staff who agreed to most of the requested changes. The parent-school partnership was not formed until the relationship was "re-constructed on a more equal basis to overcome generations of negative assumptions about the perceived lack of interest of these parents regarding their children's schooling" (2004-2005: 38-39). The parent support group was transformative and empowering as many of the parents gained confidence and knowledge about decision-making. Some of the parents participated in district wide events to advocate their project and make policy changes.

Thus, Latino parents have in some instances overcome the educational barriers that prevented them from participating and deciding what is best for their children's future. In California, the "Parent Trigger" Law allows parents in underperforming schools to make changes in the staff, including principals and teachers. It also provides a means of converting public schools into charter schools if 51 percent of parents in the school sign a petition. The *Huffington Post* (Anderson 2012) reports that parents in the Adelanto School District in Southern California are currently disputing a court ruling that rejected their signed petition. The community, composed of mostly low-income minorities, is attempting to gain control of the school due to the "chronically poor academic performance at the school, where more than half of the students fail standardized state tests in math or reading" (Anderson 2012). The parents are fighting for the power to decide what is best for their children. These forms of resistance are

responses to the conflict between the schools and parents. Edward Olivos describes how these tensions are further complicated when parents are educated and involved:

That is, as Latino parents begin to grow more knowledgeable about their children's educational rights and their rights as parents (through workshops, trainings, personal experience, etc.), they may become more assertive in demanding them from the school. This causes a tension for school personnel who are often accustomed to having a compliant Latino parent population that follows the dictates of the school without question ... Rather, I believe there are tensions deeply embedded in the relationship between Latino parents and the public schools, tensions involving issues of culture, knowledge, and power (Olivos 2004:29).

For these reasons, parents and schools are forming partnerships based on shared decision which offers parents a sense of empowerment and ownership (Delgado-Gatan 1991). The literature points to the contradictory myths of Latino parents' lack of involvement. Indeed, education is highly valued by many Latino parents who have challenged an educational system characterized by decades of institutional racism, while waves of Latino children aspire to attend college.

Methods

During my initial visits to *Las Campeonas de la Salud*, I felt like an outsider because the group had already developed intimate relationships and members were hesitant to open up to researchers. I was known as the “anthropologist” who was there to write the story of *Las Campeonas*. Yet, I was a second-generation Mexican-American and married mother with a six-year old daughter and therefore shared common experiences of immigration, motherhood, education, and health. My continuous participation and conversations with the women helped me gain the *confianza* (trust) and rapport necessary to be one of the *Campeonas*. Interestingly, during several of the meetings when I was not publicly recognized, the mothers expressed differences with the organizers. On the one hand, I felt very embarrassed because I was uncertain of my ambiguous position, but on the other hand, I felt reassured that they were acknowledging and accepting me as a member of their group. The mothers who were the lead organizers apologized after the meetings and gave me an award certification as they had with the other members. This opportunity to belong and be part of the in-group affected the relationship I soon developed with several of the women.

I utilized seven months of participant-observations and ten semi-structured interviews to document the group’s narratives. My observations were carried out during *Las Campeonas* meetings and events as well as programs for families at McKinley Elementary School. In addition, interviews were conducted with the SJSU health science department staff, members of *Las Campeonas*, and the principal of McKinley to understand the role and relationship of the community-university partnership. I conducted two additional follow-up interviews with *madres líderes* for the oral histories project.

My participant-observation with *Las Campeonas de la Salud* began during the 2011-2012 school year. I attended their weekly health education workshops and joined their *convivios* (gatherings). The health education classes consisted of one and a half hour presentations on topics such as dental hygiene, meditation, aromatherapy, breast cancer, diabetes, talking to children about sexual intercourse, menopause, and natural skin products. The classes also consisted of three six-week courses on cooking, leadership, and immigration. These classes were presented by students enrolled in the Health Science 104 class, experts in the community, and health promoters from local organizations. During these classes, the women in the group asked questions, shared stories, had a snack and entered a raffle to win prizes. Additionally, I attended two *convivios* where members were given awards and a small gift for their participation. Another *convivio* was a celebration following the cooking session where the women brought dishes to share. The *convivios* and the health education workshop meetings are the foundation of *Las Campeonas* because it is where relationships develop and information is exchanged.

I also attended three events sponsored by the Health Science 104 class and *Las Campeonas*, which were *La Cultura* (culture), *La Piyamada* (pajama party), and *La Pulga* (flea market). The events are usually on the weekend or late evenings during the week. These are public events where families at the McKinley community and students from the Health Science class interact through educational and entertaining endeavors. The students organize activities for the children from art to sports, while *Las Campeonas* enforce rules and raise funds through food and raffle sales. I was able to experience *La Piyamada* firsthand by bringing along my daughter. We went through the art stations and when she finished, she earned credit for the library. This was a valuable experience as I

was able to relate to the other parents attending and to understand the impact it can have on a child. These are fun educational events for the family and community.

I had the opportunity to volunteer at the Family Giving Tree event and attend an immigration workshop and Thanksgiving potluck by the *Grupo de Apoyo* (support group) at McKinley lead by Yadeel Haro de Lopez, a *madre líder*. Interestingly, many of the women are involved in multiple organizations that overlap with others. The Family Giving Tree event is a Christmas celebration that offers gifts for children. The parents enrolled ahead of time and provided a check list indicating the toys their child needs. The event was well coordinated and organized, since each family was given an hour to collect their toys. During this one hour, the families enjoyed a meal, raffle, art activities, face painting, a piñata, and pictures with Santa Claus. I helped with the food for the first half and then face painting for the second half. The event moved very quickly as families rotated in and out each hour, while several student and parent volunteers helped. The *Grupo de Apoyo* was a series of workshops at the cafeteria for the parents. The workshop I attended was given by a lawyer about immigration, which drew about 25 to 30 parents. The event was well attended by the community, especially considering the fact that it took place in the morning. The lawyer was very knowledgeable about the legal system and the phenomenon of illegitimate law offices. The following week, I also attended a Thanksgiving potluck *convivio* for the *Grupo de Apoyo*. The principal and many of *Las Campeonas* joined the gathering. The occasion called for every woman in the room to mention one thing that she was thankful for in her life. I listened to women talk about their families, health, work, friends, and finances. These opportunities allowed me to see

how a *madre líder* used her resources and leadership skills to bring information to the community.

Interviews with the chair and two staff members of the SJSU Health Science Department, the principal at McKinley Elementary School, and six *Campeonas* were conducted by two graduate students and myself. We interviewed the chair, staff, and principal because we hoped they could tell us about the partnership, the history of *Las Campeonas*, and background information about the school and community. By contrast, the selection process for *Las Campeonas* was based on convenience sampling. We presented to the group our projects and asked for volunteers. Eventually six of them contacted us. The participants' membership in the group varied from one to four years. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, transcribed, and translated to English by our graduate team (all of whom were bilingual). We asked the *Campeonas* about their participation, the structure and sustainability of *Las Campeonas*, the McKinley community, and the community-university partnership.

I also conducted two follow-up interviews with the *madres líderes* for the oral histories project. The participants were the first leaders of the group and had four years of membership. I conducted the interviews in Spanish, transcribed, and translated them. I asked each woman about her childhood, motherhood, schooling experience, family, and leadership. The interviews were very insightful as I learned more about the life experiences that have shaped their leadership today.

My research study was informed by the methods, tools, and perspectives of applied anthropology. Alexander M. Ervin asserts, "Its strengths are a vast and deep knowledge base, holism, insights from qualitative methodologies, and, most of all,

grounded connections to communities' realities, aspirations, and needs" (2005:1). These methodologies of participant observation and interviews are suitable given the vulnerable nature of marginalized immigrant communities. My seven months of participating in the health education workshops, *convivios*, and events were effective in earning the trust of *Las Campeonas*. The time allowed us to exchange stories of motherhood, immigration, and education in which the women learned about my background and family, and vice versa, I learned about them. I established a mutual relationship with the women and informed them about my research project. Our team presented to the group and included their research ideas into our project design; however, the most interesting aspect of this presentation was the dialogue that followed. The women discussed how important it was to document and record the history of *Las Campeonas* for their families and community. My research was grounded in these conversations, observations, and interviews that called for participation and involvement. The interview process was also empowering in the sense that the women were proud and astounded by their own knowledge and experiences. Applied anthropology not only documents and narrates the story of a group, but it provides suggestions to help improve it. In the conclusion, I offer recommendations based on my participant-observation and interviews that can be used to mediate between the community and university.

Part II

Community-University Partnership: Beyond Health Education

History

Las Campeonas de la Salud is a partnership that formally began in 2008 between McKinley Elementary School and San Jose State University Health Science Department. This collaborative relationship developed over several years of trust-building and commitment. Dr. Kathleen Roe, chair of the Health Science Department, was in the midst of creating a community-based project in San Jose with a three-year health grant she received to reduce health inequality and maintain a sustainable partnership with a community agency. The grant also required the already busy master's students in Public Health to fulfill a service learning project in the local community. In many ways the grant facilitated Dr. Roe's own interest in bridging the university to the community as she was transitioning to a more locally-based project. She consulted a professor who had been involved with Communitercity, a partnership between San Jose State University, Five Wounds/Brookwood Terrace communities, and the city of San Jose. She learned about McKinley Elementary School, a small school with a predominantly Mexican immigrant population in need of resources. Dr. Roe and Aurora Garcia, principal at McKinley, began their working relationship in 2006 with health and educational events that brought hundreds of families together. One of the first events organized by the graduate students and chair was a Family Health Night consisting of a free dinner that included spaghetti, a green salad, and fruit as well as games for the families. The first year, 200 people attended and the second year the number grew to 350 people. In addition, they assisted the families in the school's yearly Science Fair event in which elementary students presented science projects at the cafeteria. During a school meeting, Aurora asked the parents if they were aware of the standards children were expected to utilize in their

science fair projects. She realized that many of the parents were unable to help their children design a science project. The Health Science Department organized a workshop to explain scientific experiments to parents and to inform them about how to create poster boards. The success of these events motivated Dr. Roe and students to offer health educational classes during the weekly *Cafecitos* (coffee) meetings at McKinley, which are facilitated by the principal and are used to inform parents about issues surrounding the school. Nevertheless, one mother described how the groups separated as a result of the limited time and the different objectives of *Cafecitos* and *Campeonas*:

That separation was decided because it was in the cafeteria that there were themes about problems in the school and that was during the time when they also talked about health but the time was too short. Well, I was one of them who gave the idea and the principal said “yes, that is a good idea; we should separate so that we can have the space for *Campeonas* and [a separate] one for *Cafecitos*.” We began *Las Campeonas* in the cafeteria but then in a year we were given a room, which was P-10 and that’s where we used to be. That is how *Campeonas* began.

Campeonas was formed in 2008, yet what distinguishes this university-community partnership is the way in which the group grew organically through a ground-up approach. The university and the community developed a list of commitments to foster their relationship. Thus, the community was involved in the decision-making that empowered and entitled many of the women to take ownership of the group.

Las Campeonas has undergone many changes throughout the years as it continues to grow and evolve. One major change has been that *Las Campeonas de la Salud* is now a branch of *Salud Familiar en McKinley*. In other words, *Salud Familiar* oversees *Las Campeonas* and other programs run at McKinley by the Health Science Department. Among these programs is *Las Flores*, facilitated by Angelica Diaz, which provides health

educational and leadership workshops for children. The group was initiated by the children of *Las Campeonas* who were inspired to have their own group. *Las Flores* consists of activities such as making healthy snacks, social activities, and health education. The group raises issues concerning young girls, such as bullying, self-esteem, nutrition, and physical activity. In addition, the students from the Health Science 104 class initiated a summer program due to the lack of sports and physical activities for the children. The university students volunteer and organize a weekly schedule to offer sports, water games, and fun physical activities for the summer. Another small yet vital program that began over a year ago was a garden project at the school. A small grant makes it possible for a garden educator to teach children about food systems utilizing curriculum that fulfills their language arts, math, and science standards. Moreover, the most recent pilot program, *Comida Casera*, consists of food insecurity research and healthy cooking sessions. The research revealed the need for a Second Harvest Food Bank drop-off site at McKinley. The food bank donates food to qualifying low-income families on a monthly basis; however, families enrolled in the program had to walk a far distance, while other families were unfamiliar with the program or the process. The health science department organized and informed many families about the program, so that beginning in 2012, McKinley Elementary School was officially designated as a drop-off site. These are just a few of the innovative activities, programs and services being offered by *Salud Familiar en McKinley*.

The McKinley Community

The McKinley neighborhood is composed predominantly of Latinos and an emerging Vietnamese population. A few blocks from the McKinley Elementary School is “Little Saigon,” a Vietnamese business district that is rapidly expanding with new buildings underway. A few of the offices advertise to both Vietnamese and Latino communities with bold signs in both Vietnamese and Spanish facing the streets. Nevertheless, on the opposite side of Little Saigon and closer to the school are *taquerias*, *panaderias* (bakeries), grocery stores, and small shops catering to Latinos. The two immigrant communities are separated by a freeway overpass symbolic of social, cultural, political, and economic divisions. As Vietnamese entrepreneurs build a newly designed business district, the McKinley community surrounding the school is plagued with poverty.

The problems at McKinley partly stem from the neglect and low priority of city officials to improve the housing and living conditions of residents. During the course of my weekly commutes, I noticed a dead cat in the middle of the street, trash on the curbs and sidewalks, graffiti on trash bins and walls, children riding bikes without safety gear or adult supervision, and music blaring from apartments. During the health education workshops, some of the mothers shared a story about a young boy who was murdered by the cross fire of gang members. They described how the boy was killed while riding his bike and how his body remained on the ground during the police investigation. Parents were also concerned about their safety since gang members threatened one woman’s boyfriend and another woman witnessed gang initiations at a nearby park. Due to budget cuts, fewer police are protecting the streets and gang violence is increasing. One mother

living in a second floor apartment explained to me that she does not allow her children to play downstairs because she is afraid something awful might happen. In many cases, slum landlords are responsible for these types of activities because they do not screen renters and do not administer safety measures in neighborhoods with high violence. Immigrant families are dealing with these obstacles (besides employment and educational barriers) on a daily basis in order to have better opportunities for their children.

McKinley Elementary School is located within this community and has 553 students. According to the 2010-2011 Student Accountability Report Card (McKinley Elementary School 2011-2012), 87 percent of the students are Latino and 10 percent are Asian (mostly Vietnamese). The demographic shift towards an increasing Vietnamese and Asian population is steadily changing the landscape of the community. Nevertheless, there is an overwhelming Latino immigrant population struggling in the educational system.

The McKinley School has low test scores as indicated by the Academic Performance Index (API) score of 739 compared to California's API of 778 (McKinley Elementary School 2011-2012). In examining the ethnic composition of scores, Latinos API score of 726 is far behind the Asians score of 847. The 121 point difference demonstrates the disparities and inequalities faced by immigrant students taking standardized testing. At the same time, students are affected by these low test scores that create obstacles and barriers to the already marginalized community. Students have to focus on raising their test scores, while also dealing with pressure from the district to have programs correspond to language arts and math standards. Thus, the McKinley

school juggles these district-level requirements as it continues to work with organizations and programs that encourage parent involvement.

The McKinley Elementary School's website (2012) promotes parent involvement as it "results in improved academic and social achievement for your child and better communication between parents and school." The school offers informative and educational programs, such as the School Site Council (SSC), McKinley English Language Advisory Council (MELAC), *Cafecitos*, FAST, *Las Campeonas de la Salud* and Latino Literacy Programs. There are also organizations assisting the school, such as CommUniverCity, Sacred Heart, Family Giving Tree, Community Health Partnerships, and Catholic Charities. These programs and organizations are intended to improve children's academic performance and parents' relationship to the school.

The principal plays an important role in creating a space that welcomes Latino immigrant families, as her own experience of immigration and education is pivotal to the relationship she has developed with the families, and to the functioning of the McKinley School. Aurora was born in México and immigrated with her parents at the age of seven to the Salinas Valley. Salinas was a small close-knit community at the time and had only one joint elementary and middle school. She describes how as a child, she pretended to be a teacher using dolls as students, which reflected the innate passion she had for teaching. Following these aspirations, Aurora enrolled at San Jose State University in 1978 and has remained in San Jose ever since. She taught in the Alum Rock School District for 20 years and has been with the Franklin-McKinley School District for 11 years. Aurora not only loved to teach, but wanted to be involved with the decision-

making of schools. She describes the process of becoming a principal and the supportive factors that led to her progress:

I participated in everything that was available whether it was choosing new curriculum or being on different committees. I always wanted to be a part of it because I always wanted to be part of the decision-making. It came to a point when some of my principals and other district personal saw that passion and they encouraged me to continue. In fact at the time my superintendent released me one day a week from school so that I could attend school to get my administrative credential. I knew that they believed in me, so I just continued.

Aurora continues to exemplify these qualities of dedication and commitment towards enriching the lives of the students and their families. A message on the SARC states, “The school is not only a place where children come to learn but it is truly the hub of the community” (2011-2012:1). It took Aurora two years to create a community space where parents were able to learn how the educational system functions and discuss issues concerning the school. The *Cafecitos* meetings are where she covers topics such as reading, safety, health, standards in language arts, science and math, standardized testing, and tardy and absence policies. The relationship between the parents and school has flourished into a partnership, which she refers to as an “extended family.”

As a principal, Aurora feels that children should learn to maintain respect, and preserve culture and language. She tells the parents and children that the school is like a home and there should be respect for one another. She explains how she teaches children respect in the office:

I talk to my kids when they come and they are in trouble and I ask them, “Is this the way you would act at home? Is this the way you would act at church? Is this the way you would act at a fancy restaurant?” So I think they all need to know that there are norms wherever you go. There are different ways of conducting

yourself even when they walk in my office. I have even done this in front of the parents. When the kids are dragging their feet or slouching or whatever, I say “not in my office. You are going to walk out and come out and come right here with respect. I am not your mom, I am not your parent, I am not your sister, I am your principal, so this is the way you need to act.”

She also teaches the children to be proud of their culture and background while being respectful towards those of different cultures. Having the university students (many of whom are not Latino) at events is also an opportunity for children to learn about different cultures, since most interact primarily with other Latinos. The expectation is that children and university students will also be respectful towards each other. Aurora holds everybody to the same standards as she works with children, parents, university students, and local organizations. Her immigrant background and accomplishments in education have been vital to the relationships she has cultivated in the school and community.

San Jose State University Health Science Department

The Health Science Department is the primary coordinator of *Las Campeonas de la Salud*, a branch of *Salud Familiar en McKinley*. Dr. Kathleen Roe, chair of the department, directs and manages the financial and functional aspects of the group through the university. In addition, she teaches the Health Science 104 class that is integrated into the events of *Las Campeonas*. During the fall 2011 semester, Dr. Roe was on sabbatical, so Professor Robert M. Rinck taught the class. The class syllabus states that students have “a chance to get out of the classroom and see how course concepts really work in practice through planning, implementing, and evaluating family health events for our project *Salud Familiar en Mckinley*” (Rinck 2011:5). The 125 (approximately) students enrolled in the class organize the seven health events at McKinley each semester. There are also student assistants hired from the department to work on the different *Salud Familiar* programs; including one bilingual student, Maziel, who facilitates and works directly with *Las Campeonas*. Lastly, the Friends of Arrazola is a partnership between the *Asociacion de Artisanos Ecoalebrjes* (Association of Ecoalebrijes Artisans) of Arrazola, Oaxaca, México and the health science department, which has also played an important role in the community. I will discuss in greater depth the relationship that the Arrazola families have formed with *Las Campeonas* in the following section, but it is important to note how the department has created an *intercambio* (exchange) between a small Mexican rural community of artisans in Oaxaca and the immigrant mothers in San Jose, California. Needless to say, the community is benefiting from the vibrant programs, knowledge, and relationships, while the SJSU students are also learning and applying their public health skills.

As part of this partnership agreement, the university has developed a long-term relationship based on *confianza* (trust) and commitments to the community. The project was established with the intention of providing health education resources to the low-income Latino families. The focus has been on the needs and priorities of the community rather than publishing peer-reviewed papers and books, which often occurs among professors obtaining tenure-track. The department instead centers on the families' needs by allowing them to participate and have a voice in the decision-making and dissemination of research and photographs. For instance, the *madres líderes* prepare the agenda, members choose the health topics, and everyone is invited to join the steering committee. Their involvement and participation in the process has given them a sense of ownership and entitlement. At the same time, the Health Science Department has had conflict with other organizations where parents were sometimes unable to differentiate between sponsors of workshops and events, which obligated it to reevaluate its vision and goals. The department was forced to reduce their partnerships in order to maintain their priorities and commitment to the families.

The Health Science Department continues to grow and evolve with the support of the McKinley community, health science students, and dean of the College of Applied Sciences and Arts. The McKinley families are the foundation of the group and they have consistently demonstrated their support with high turnout rates in the programs and events. Aurora Garcia has also allocated a room for *Las Campeonas* to host their weekly classes and health education workshops. She understands the benefits of having healthy families; therefore, having a space for the university students and parents to collaborate has an effect on student performance and attendance. Additionally, the health science

students are eager to share their knowledge and learn from the community. Aldo Chazaro, a SJSU student who is lead project coordinator of *Salud Familiar*, began as a volunteer and soon became a parent organizer and project coordinator. He is well-known among the mothers because he has promoted the group by passing out flyers in the front the school and presenting at meetings in the school. The community respects him because he works alongside the women on an equal basis. Aldo expressed how the women view him as a brother and how one child even called him an uncle. Nevertheless, Aldo and many other students at San Jose State University share a common culture and history of immigration with the mothers that enable them to make that connection. Many of the students from the Health Science 104 class are inspired by *Las Campeonas*' classroom presentations where the mothers, children, and principal come together and speak about the group. The confidence among the children and mothers to describe their lives at McKinley and their involvement in front of hundreds of students shows their compassion and support. For instance, one mother states the following about her experience at the university:

It is very beautiful to go out and talk about *Las Campeonas* to the 104 class. That is where we often go to talk about the group and to see the faces in the students who truly do the work from their heart... their faces of happiness. Satisfaction is something that is short because I don't have the words to describe it but it is something beautiful and impressionable.

The department and *Las Campeonas* have a reciprocal relationship that has developed from visits to each other's communities and homes. The dean, Dr. Charles Bullock, acknowledges the partnership between Health Science Department and the McKinley community through an award ceremony and generous funding of the program. The

support from the dean of the college, the community, and students is a major factor in sustaining the group.

The Health Science Department has granted invaluable resources to the community. One important contribution has been the confidence developed among the women, which has been manifested in the rise of parent involvement and leadership at the school. A student pointed out to how the mothers have become more involved in the school as a result of the department's presence. Moreover, children's access to the university is facilitated through frequent interactions with students. A project report by CommUniverCity in the Five Woods-Brookwood Terrace (FWBT) neighborhoods (Darrah and Noravian 2008) found that although education was highly valued among parents, they typically knew few people who attended the university. These shocking results had an impact on Dr. Roe, who was just starting to work at McKinley (where the study was partly conducted). She then used the Health Science events as a tool to close the gap between Latino immigrants and higher education. For example, many of *Las Campeonas*' children make presentations to over a hundred university students each year about their favorite event or program of *Salud Familiar*. Rosa (pseudonym) describes one of her most memorable moments:

Another example is when we were at the university and my son spoke. I have never seen him speak in that way. He spoke and spoke. I thought to myself because I did not know he could say all of that. I thought how amazing.

Many of these children also know the names of SJSU graduate and undergraduate students from the Health Science 104 events. Therefore, the university successfully assists children and families develop confidence and access to the university.

Health Science 104 Events

The Health Science 104 class organizes a series of events at McKinley Elementary school each year. During the fall 2011 semester, the students organized: *La Pulga*, *La Piyamada*, *La Cultura*, the Olympics, Community Safety Night, Mothers' Spa, and Winter Crafts. The class is divided among teams that plan and organize one event with *Las Campeonas'* support. Here I discuss my experiences and observations at *la pulga*, *la piyamada* and *la cultura* event along with the women's narratives.

La Pulga was a flea market at the McKinley school parking lot where families and small businesses rented spaces to sell used and new merchandise. On the weekends, flea markets are popular sites for Mexican families to visit. The San Jose Flea Market website (2010) advertises, "For 50 years we've been the place loved ones have made memories while playing, shopping, and eating together." Resembling a flea market, the parking lot at McKinley was transformed by rows of vendors and educational workshops in each car space. In the background was a disc jockey and former health science student, German Blanco, who played Spanish *Banda* music that livened the environment. At the front of the school were *Las Campeonas* selling hot dogs, chips, tostadas, drinks, and raffle tickets to raise funds for expenses during the year. In addition, *Las Flores* were also selling oatmeal and smoothies to raise funds for their girls' health club. A grassy gated area in the front was used for a soccer match led by a health science student. The older fourth and fifth grade boys surrounded this area. When I arrived at the school, the shoppers were just trickling in as the vendors were finishing setting up their tables and stands.

I purchased an oatmeal cup for fifty cents from the girls and walked around the parking lot with my colleague. I ran into a *madre líder* who was carrying a clip board and paper directing vehicles and people. We talked briefly, but were soon interrupted by a vehicle going in the wrong direction and she quickly left to talk to him. She had also learned that someone was selling food without a permit, so she had to attend to that matter. I saw a young 26-year old pregnant mother, Yesenia (pseudonym), who had three children and was selling used children's books, clothes, and appliances. I bought two books for my daughter and Yesenia told me about the difficult financial circumstances she was facing as a single parent. This was a great opportunity for her to earn some money while she prepared for her fourth child. She was living in one room and although it was an unfortunate situation, she explained how the women in *Las Campeonas* had helped her with housing and supplies for her children. Yesenia knew that she could count on this extended support network to open their homes and help even if they also lacked the resources. We finished talking and I ran into Dr. Roe who had two small children. She wanted them to ask me questions, since collecting signatures from SJSU students would make them eligible to win a prize. They were shy and wrapped themselves around her to avoid asking questions, but Dr. Roe quickly helped them and I signed their cards. *La Pulga* was a unique environment where education, community, culture and relationships were all cultivated.

La Piyamada ("the pajama party") is an event where children, dressed in their pajamas, circulate through various stations to learn about health, work on arts and crafts projects, and listen to stories. For this event, I took my daughter and experienced the activities from a parent's perspective. We signed up at the entrance and received two

cards for a bingo game and the stations. The children were expected to collect signatures from San Jose State University students by asking questions from the bingo card. They also received stamps from every completed station on the following card. On our mission to fill out both cards, I noticed that there was a language barrier between the Spanish speaking parents and the English speaking health science students. The parents would resolve these issues by having the children translate and other times when the child was shy or young, the parent would point to the cards. However, Rosa, a *madre líder*, described how parents overcome these barriers:

At times the young people may not speak Spanish, but we always try to create ways of communicating and perhaps they understand [a little] Spanish and we understand [a little] English, so we communicate like that. It is something beautiful that you feel even though we do not speak the same language, we understand each other.

Interestingly, there was a sense of respect and courtesy even though they were unable to understand each other. However, the underlying problem has forced some of the women to learn English and use it in their daily lives.

When mothers and children were asked about their favorite event, *La Piyamada* was always mentioned. One mother said “*La Piyamada* [is my favorite] because the kids come with their books and others read to them.” Another woman explained, “My children would enjoy the events, they would learn new things, important things, and at the same time they would be fun...It’s like going to school but having fun learning.” I can also say that my daughter, who is a shy kindergartener, felt at ease with the friendly students and families. They talked to her while she colored a book marker, put organs on a human body poster, listened to a story and created a small book. Although the cafeteria was

crowded and unfamiliar to her, she enjoyed the educational activities. After we finished the stations, we turned in our cards to Dr. Roe and received tickets for the library to purchase items displayed across the room. My daughter, like many other children inside, was excited to buy something from the money she earned. Unfortunately, there were expensive books that required parents to pay out of pocket and this discouraged some families from buying. But there were also small and inexpensive pencils, erasers, and bookmarkers that children could purchase at the counter and this was what most children bought depending on the tickets they received. There were children at the event who worked very hard to get student signatures and those were the ones who had the most tickets, so all the children had this opportunity. Overall, my daughter had fun at the event because she took home beautiful projects that adorned our refrigerator. That night, we read the book that I helped purchase.

Finally, *La Cultura* was an entertaining event with food, arts and crafts, and dance and music performances. Similar to the *La Piyamada*, this event had stations for the children to create arts and crafts activities. There was Chinese food and fruit for the families and a seating area where they would eat. The small stage at the front was used for the cultural performances by local dance and music groups. The children were primarily in the arts and crafts stations, while the parents remained in the food area. Many of Las Campeonas women were sitting at the tables eating and talking when I arrived. We watched the performers and talked about birthing experiences. Yesenia, who was pregnant at *La Pulga* event, had by now given birth. However, another mother of three, Ana (pseudonym) had accompanied and supported her since she did not have family and the father of the child was uninvolved. Ana was affected by this experience

because she had never been to a birthing even though she already had children. She could not eat and described how traumatizing it was for her to watch Yesenia under a lot of pain. She saw when the baby was born and described how his head first appeared cone-shaped, but then normalized. There were other women also shared their own experiences, but the highlight of the night was when the newly born boy was carried around the circle of women. The dynamics of this event allowed for the women and families to *convivir* and to share these memorable experiences, such as the birthing of children.

Dr. Roe's Mothering Experience

In an interview, Dr. Roe revealed the childhood experiences that have shaped her understanding of parent involvement. I wanted to include these conversations in my research because similarly to Aurora Garcia's narrative, Dr. Roe's story reveals important background information and memories that have also developed her leadership in the community. They are both strong resilient women in the community who have influenced and affected the lives of hundreds of students and families every year.

Dr. Roe was raised in the 1960's during the time when school officials typically took for granted the family and parents' participation. She began her story with a description of the educational system growing up and her parents' instrumental role in the school:

So the things that set me up to such great work all came from the time and place in which I grew up, when my mother and my father got to be very actively involved in the ways that they wanted to be in my early education. So we had everything and our school was a wonderful center of everything and I learned to play the violin starting when I was eight years old. I played my whole life and the school gave me a violin, a good one! My family didn't have the money. My father was a minister, a local minister, so we didn't have any money but we had every

opportunity to take dance lessons, community theatre, everything. A lot of our moms didn't work outside of the home in those days. So our moms were very much [involved] in the schools. So these were white moms, middle class white moms, in Palo Alto, but they were at the school, in the classroom, all the time.

Palo Alto is a more affluent city than San Jose and the quality of education and test scores between the two cities reflects these differences. However, resources for children's development and well-being are being reduced and constantly threatened throughout California due to the economic recession and constant budget crisis. Dr. Roe was fortunate to have had her school provide these programs because today, these music and enrichment programs are typically offered outside schools at an extra cost to parents. Nevertheless, she was able to take advantage of these resources because her mother was very involved in the classroom and school.

During Dr. Roe's initial visits to McKinley, she noticed the mothers' isolation at the school. She felt that the mothers did not quite fit into the school or have a sense of belonging. This was disturbing to her as she recounted her mother's confidence in the educational system:

The difference is my mom felt that [the school] was her place. My mom had gone through three years of college and then she had me and then she had to drop out, but she knew what was going to happen in elementary school, she knew she had a vision for me. She knew how to make that happen and she just seamlessly walked right into my elementary school and she didn't live there, she was a minister's wife, so she had other responsibilities too, but she was so much a part of everything and that gave me so much confidence as a girl. There was no separation between my home behavior and my school behavior, I never acted out at school because my mom would be there at any moment and I was proud of my mom. None of this was visible to me until I was at McKinley. I saw my mom

being a leader, I saw my mom being respected by teachers, I saw my mom organize things and be effective, and I saw how a woman could be.

At an early age, Dr. Roe was influenced by her mother's active role at the school. Even though her mother dropped out of college, it did not affect the way in which she perceived her mother. Her mother was confident of the school system despite the obstacles she faced. At the same time, Dr. Roe also learned about parenting in México while abroad in Oaxaca and learned that the mothers were confident there. She has thought about these mothering experiences and marveled over the immigrant mothers' limited sense of belonging and confidence. She believes that many immigrant mothers lose these qualities after coming to the United States. These experiences were important to Dr. Roe because she was able to develop her leadership skills through her own mother's involvement and now that the immigrant women have developed their confidence and belonging through *Campeonas*, their children are learning too.

Las Campeonas de la Salud

Las Campeonas de la Salud is a group of Mexican immigrant women with children attending McKinley Elementary School. The group is composed of two *madres líderes* (mother-leaders) and 15 to 30 participants on a weekly basis. The educational level of women ranges from no formal schooling to technical degrees. The women are non-English speakers who are either unemployed or have temporary employment in housekeeping, child care, grocery stores, or work from home selling beauty and household products. *Las Campeonas* is a close-knit community of involved mothers working together to improve the health of their families.

The name *Las Campeonas de la Salud* originated from a Spanish translation of the Kaiser program called “Health Champions.” However, prior to adopting the name, they were known as *Cafecitos* and until the official group separated four years ago, was when the women began claiming a deeper sense of ownership. Yadeel, the former *madre líder*, explains what *Las Campeonas* means to her and how it has evolved:

It means that we are a group of women fighters and champions to be honest. Well to me it is about the power. I think it [*Las Campeonas*] is a star that came to our path because so many marvelous things have come because of it. Besides, it began as *Campeonas* and then everything else started coming like the Health Fair, the Olympics, and all the programs from the university. *La Pulga*, the Spa, and *La Piyamada* all came from the roots of *Las Campeonas*.

Another member, Lupe (pseudonym), expressed the meaning of *Campeonas*:

I tell my sister that she is a *Campeona* because she is surviving her disease. I tell her, “You are my *Campeona*, you are my *Campeona*, my fighter!” I feel like she is fighting to lead a better, healthier life. She is going through her second chemotherapy and I tell her, “You are my *Campeona*!” And in the same way, here we are also fighting to stop illness and disease.

The women describe how the name has taken on different meanings that are connected to their experiences. Yadeel was the founder, so her understanding is based on the initial collaborative relationship with the Health Science Department, while Lupe associates *Campeonas* with a struggle for better, healthy families. Nonetheless, the six women interviewed identified themselves as *Campeonas* and felt a strong connection with the name.

Parents at the McKinley School have responded positively and negatively toward the group. Some of the parents participate in *Las Campeonas*' workshops and classes, while others can not due to work or family obligations. These parents feel positive when they are able to attend *Las Campeonas* sponsored workshops, classes or events. On the other hand, there are those parents that feel *Campeonas* is a place for gossip, not authentic work. This has been the most common myth about the group, often fueled by stereotypes concerning women. One mother states, "The parents think we are a group of 'gossipers' and that we are wasting our time at the school. They do not get involved because they do not know." This challenges cultural notions of individualism and "minding your own business" attitudes. Even though there are divisions among parents, *Las Campeonas* also brings more people together through their workshops, classes, and events.

Many of *Las Campeonas* are immigrant women with no relatives beyond their immediate family, so they form "extended families" with members of the group, university staff and students, McKinley School, and local organizations. For instance, Rosa (pseudonym) describes how she copes with her family's absence:

The good thing is that I am never alone because there is always someone that is with me. Perhaps my family is not here like I would like them to be. I would like

my mom to be here but she is not. There are other people that may not completely fill that void that is for my parents, but they are still worried about me and I am worried about them. I have gained friends and other great things as well.

Las Campeonas contributes in many ways to the well-being of immigrant women seeking a sense of belonging, community, familiarity or home. The friendships they form with other women in the group develop into these “extended families.”

As with any group and organization, there are differences and conflicts among members, which need immediate resolution. During a holiday potluck, I witnessed an apology between two members who had a quarrel. Rosa describes how this event was memorable:

Maybe sometimes the women fight with each other, but in the end they will forgive each other. We correct our errors. There was one woman who asked to be forgiven by another *Campeona* in front of everyone because she did not want to dwell on it and I think it is something beautiful that they recognize the good and the bad. There are things that stick with you and perhaps these are the things that help you excel. If she can do it, so can I and these are the things that will always be stuck in your mind.

Similarly, brothers and sisters fight but forgive each other because they understand their connection as family members. The women also view themselves part of a community that is strong and resilient, so they attempt to repair those wounds. I saw the two women cry and hug each other, while other *Campeonas* watched and cried with them. The dispute was between two members but it had disrupted the harmony of the group. The women continue to break through these obstacles in order to develop stronger friendships and relationships.

Although many of *Las Campeonas* are low-income immigrant women, they try to help one another survive and thrive even as they struggle to make a living. Most of the families are supported by volatile, temporary, and seasonal employment. However, the generosity and humbleness of the women is exemplified by their willingness to take care of each other during difficult times. Yesenia, a single mother with four children, was provided housing, financial resources, and emotional support by other *Campeonas* during the birthing of her youngest boy. Another example was when *Las Campeonas* supported Elisa who was depressed and felt guilty after her sister died in México and was unable to attend her funeral arrangements. Elisa describes how she now feels about her sister's loss:

I am calmer now. My sister is in my heart and I will never forget her. I feel better going to *Las Campeonas*. I would hide my sister's photos around the house because I did not want to see them. Now it is okay, I have them [pictures] up again. She is in my heart and I know it.

Many immigrant women find it difficult to cope with the loss of a loved one, since they can not say their farewells in person or spend the time they would have if they had remained in their homeland. This raises important issues regarding immigration and policies that are separating families across borders. *Las Campeonas* creates a safe space for sharing experiences with other women in similar circumstances and allows the women to provide economical, social, and emotional support for one another.

Las Campeonas has also developed a mutual relationship with the Health Science students and the *Artisanos Ecoalebrijes* de Arrazola, Oaxaca, México. Friends of Arrazola is a partnership between the Health Science Department and the Artisanos Ecoalebrijes. For one week, the Health Science students' travel to Oaxaca, México for a

“spring break of education, service, and cultural exchange” (Ecoalebrijes 2012). The students promote public health education through health fairs, water management inspections, and presentations in schools. The relationship between *Las Campeonas* and the *Artisanos Ecoalebrijes* began when *Las Campeonas* surprised the Health Science students by raising funds through food sales to support their trip to Arrazola. The women were once impressed by a big check given to the Health Science Department. In turn, they crafted their own “big check” onto a cardboard box and presented it to the students and staff. These low-income marginalized women raised over \$300 for the students’ service learning trip. Dr. Roe explains what followed:

And they [*Las Campeonas*] were so proud when they gave us the big check and they said this will last much longer than the Walmart check because this was made out of a box. We folded up the check on its creases and we carried that check to *Arrazola* and we presented it on the last night. The *Arrazola* people could not believe it...So they challenged themselves to make the most beautiful big *Alebrije*, something we could never afford to buy, but they could sell for maybe one thousand dollars. They gave us this to raffle so that we can use that money to support *Las Campeonas*. This is just an incredible circle of generous, thoughtful, and purposeful people. I think that’s what makes it really special, very unique.

The communities all came together to help one another and even though they could have used the money, they each contributed in different ways to each other’s cause. This is the reciprocity and exchange that has unfolded as a result of the relationships and community they have developed.

Health Education Workshops

Two *madres líderes* and a student assistant of the Health Science Department coordinate and organize the weekly health education workshops, English classes, and

Zumba classes for *Las Campeonas*. The health education workshops were divided into two different approaches: 1) topics varied weekly such as dental hygiene, meditation, aromatherapy, breast cancer, diabetes, talking to children about sexual intercourse, menopause, and natural skin products; and 2) three six-week sessions on cooking healthy, leadership, and immigration. The first approach was used during the fall 2011 semester (September through December) and the second approach was offered in the spring 2012 semester (January through May). The health education workshops are presented by students enrolled in the Health Science 104 class, experts in the community, and health promoters of local organizations. The English classes are for beginners learning how to speak and read the language. In the past, *Las Campeonas* offered a computer class that taught the basics of computer programs and software. The English and computer classes are meant to teach practical skills that can be applied to their daily lives. The group also provides a physical fitness class of *Zumba*. This Latin aerobics dance class has gained popularity among Latina women in the United States. These classes are all important contributions of *Las Campeonas*; however, my participant observation focused on the health education workshops.

The initial workshops began with ice breakers and team building games that allowed the women to interact and get to know each other. The ice breakers included a guessing game, bingo, yarn web activity, and balloon game. The winner of the games received small prizes such as notepads, plates, scrubs, pot holders and small towels. Unfortunately, many of the women had to drop off their small children in kindergarten and could not participate in these activities.

The health education workshops centered on diseases, prevention, nutrition and family health. German Blanco, a former health science student, presented a workshop on diabetes and brought Spanish booklets for every one from his recent training in México. The informative booklet described the causes, symptoms, diets, and detection of diabetes. German also raised awareness of the prevalence of diabetes among the Latino population, especially among children. The mothers were concerned about diabetes and were interested in learning more about prevention and nutrition. Another student's presentation was on the use of aromatherapy to combat the common cold and allergies. The student gave each participant an empty bottle, lavender and orange oils, and directions in English and Spanish. A breast cancer workshop was very effective among the women because Angelica (pseudonym), a student and registered nurse, explained the disease and performed screenings on the women. Many members of *Las Campeonas* were concerned about breast cancer because they had close relatives that were either going through chemotherapy or had passed away due to complications. Lupe shared her sister's struggle with breast cancer to the group and the treatment she was receiving. Flor (pseudonym), a 25-year-old woman and mother of two, was suffering from a pain on her breast. She described her experience with a doctor who refused to perform further test on her because of her young age. Flor was encouraged by the group to demand more tests because it was a serious problem and the medication was ineffective. Angelica showed the women how to perform breast self-examinations and checked the women after the presentation. Former leader, Yadeel, also conducted a short presentation on mammographies and provided applications for free services. There were many other health education workshops that offered resources and information to raise vibrant healthy families.

The six-week workshops on cooking healthy, leadership building, and immigration were recently designed classes. I attended the six cooking classes and two of the leadership classes. There were 20 to 30 consistent participants interested in learning and implementing healthier meals. Jasmine (pseudonym), a health science student, taught the women how to prepare meals using common Mexican ingredients. The meals included a *nopal* (cactus) salad, stuffed bell peppers, cheese *quesadillas*, bruschetta, and cupcakes made from tofu. She taught them how to make healthier traditional Mexican plates, such as quesadilla with fruits and *nopales* with vegetables. In addition, the leadership classes were taught by Maribel Martínez from the SJSU Cesar E. Chavez Community Action Center (CCCAC). She had the women sit in a circle and use a white poster board to write notes. Maribel discussed the three characteristics that make a good leader: capacities, commitment, and base. The class was centered on dialogue where she asked questions such as “what makes a good leader?” and “what are ways to improve your leadership?” One mother states the following about a good leader:

You should know how to talk in public without criticizing and to help the most you can, so if others are embarrassed, you help or correct them. A good leader needs to have a good harmony with others and they see the leader with joy. A good leader is there because there are people that support him or her and if people are not there that is not a good leader.

The women also spoke about their weaknesses, especially lacking confidence to speak and time management. These spring workshops were more extensive than the fall semester classes because the presenters had more time with the group, so the women were more comfortable and responsive to the subject.

Leadership Development

Many of the women were shy when they began to participate in *Las Campeonas*, but over time, they developed the confidence to speak and volunteer for different roles.

Rebecca describes her experience:

Well I think that when you come here [*Las Campeonas*], you are closed in and being part of *Las Campeonas*, you have a chance to open up more. It made it easier for me to speak. If you never go out, you will be afraid. I have opened up more and more being a part of this group.

My observations at the health education workshops support Rebecca's statement as I witnessed women speaking about their private matters. One topic "Talking about Sex to Children," opened a discussion about the women's understanding of sex and experiences with their first menstruation. One woman was unfamiliar with "ejaculation" and "masturbation" concepts even though she had two children. Other women shared stories of their first menstruation, which their mothers never taught, so they did not expect to learn about sex. The women were not only confident to speak about these private matters, but they respected and trusted the group with the information.

The women who develop leadership and organizing skills are typically more confident and committed to the group. They begin with small tasks such as helping with the signs, food, flyering, and website. Then once the women are more involved, they become members of coordinating and steering committees, they organize the weekly workshops, schedule presenters, facilitate classes, and present at the university. Veronica (pseudonym), a current *madre lider*, when asked about the meaning of *Campeona* stated the following:

It is a woman who fights and exceeds like Yadeel. I am happy for her because she has fought a lot for the position she has and to be honest, she gets very involved and has a big commitment in what she does. Someday we will be like her.

Veronica's role model is Yadeel because she acknowledges the commitment and work it takes to be a leader. At the same time, it motivates and gives confidence to ordinary women who have not developed those skills. To make the position accessible to other mothers, the *madres lideres* offer child care and assistance during the workshops in order for them to learn these valuable skills without distractions. Additionally, *Las Campeonas* have been introduced to essential leadership attributes, examples of women leaders, and ways to improve their leadership skills through a six-week workshop. These classes are intended to educate and encourage women to become more involved and participate in leading roles.

Leadership development is meant to benefit not only *Las Campeonas*, but the McKinley School and community. For example, since *Las Campeonas* began more women attend *Cafecitos*. Although the majority of the women from both groups are the same, *Las Campeonas* are bringing their leadership experience to *Cafecitos*. The women are now setting the agenda at *Cafecitos* with information they would like to learn about in the school such as math, writing, and safety. They also learn about local resources in the community and they bring this information back to the parents at the school through workshops, such as the *Grupo de Apoyo* (support group) and the Family Giving Tree. In addition, Rosa describes how she shares the information she learns:

We discuss what we have learned with other friends and family. There may be someone who needs that information. If there is a class that is good, it is good to share it with someone who may not know this information.

I found many of the women were resourceful and informative, because they know where to get resources and exchange it with family and community members. As they develop more of the leadership qualities, the women learn to coordinate and organize their own workshops based on the needs of the community.

Part III

Oral Histories of *Madres Líderes*

The Stories of Two Resilient Women

The revealing stories of two *madres líderes*, Yadeel Haro de López and Silvia Montaña Echeverría, illustrate how childhood and motherhood have molded their perception of family, immigration, education, and community. Through hardship and sacrifice, these women left behind their loved ones in pursuit of better opportunities, yet the journey for the American Dream is not what they had anticipated. Finding themselves in a rundown neighborhood plagued with violence, crime, and drugs, in addition to discriminatory employment and housing policies that leave immigrant families with few options, Yadeel and Silvia are among the numerous immigrants whose stories of struggle and triumph are untold. With courage and resiliency, these women advocate for improved health and education opportunities on behalf of impoverished and marginalized communities; they are *Las Campeonas!*

Yadeel Haro de López

12 years ago, Yadeel migrated with her husband from Sinaloa, México and has lived in the McKinley community for six years. Her three daughters are in the fourth grade, first grade, and kindergarten at McKinley Elementary School, and she is currently employed at Community Health Partnership, where she informs low-income families about free and affordable health services. Yadeel is also involved in her daughters' schooling and participates in local organizations. The following story captures Yadeel's leadership development as a child and mother.

Born in a rural ranch in México 32 years ago to Rosa Amalia Beltrán and Alfredo Haro, Yadeel was raised with her brother, Xicotencatl Haro Beltrán. Alfredo migrated to

the United States in search of work when she was seven years old. He remarried and has a 21-year-old daughter, yet despite these conditions, he sent money to his family in México. Though her father was physically absent from her childhood, Yadeel maintained contact with him through letters. However, an incident which led her father to jail when she was 10 years old caused her family to lose communication with him for two years. While transitioning from elementary to middle school, Alfredo returned to México when she was 12. Though she has few memories of him as a child, it was one moment she recalls seeing him because she was older.

Yadeel grew up in a single-parent home next door to her maternal grandparents. Her mother had to work and support the family, so Yadeel and her brother took care of each other. She also tended to her grandmother, who suffered from depression and diabetes. Although their family was small, family unity was an important value. For instance, when there were fights or conflicts between brother and sister, their mother would have them apologize and forgive one another.

During childhood, Yadeel had a typical educational experience with the exception of one thing: her mother sold *churros*, ice cream, and snacks outside of the school. Yadeel's mother took advantage of these circumstances by learning about her children's academic and class performance, which further facilitated her involvement in meetings, events, committees and dances at the school. To emphasize the importance of education, her mother not only centered her employment in the vicinity of the school, she was a role model. At an early age, Yadeel understood the meaning of parent involvement and the impact it played on a child. Yadeel reflects on her mother's upbringing: "My childhood

was pressured because my mom had to work for us, but it was beautiful, and I feel good and satisfied with what my mom did during my childhood.”

After Yadeel finished middle school, she felt compelled to obtain a technical degree. She enrolled in a Mexican educational program named *Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo* (CONAFE), which offered a three-year scholarship for one year of social service. Yadeel applied her year of service by teaching preschool children in a rural community deficient in schools. With her three-year scholarship, she studied two years of cosmetology and one year of computing. The technical degree in computers was two years, so she paid for the additional year to finish her schooling. During her last year, Yadeel married her husband and graduated. Soon they embarked on a journey together to the United States.

Yadeel’s migration was the beginning of a new life and family in San José. Her husband had already lived for 18 years in the U.S. prior to her arrival in 2000. She enthusiastically tells the story of how she came to San Jose and how her living circumstances changed over time:

My husband wasn’t coming over here [San Jose], he was going to Arizona, but when we got married we came directly to San Jose and we came like an adventure because he remembered he had a friend and he remembered where he lived. When we came, we checked to see if his friend still lived there and he did live there. That is how we began our life, living in the living room of his friend’s house for two months while he [my husband] looked for a job. Then he found a job and we moved into a room and lived there for a year. Then we lived in a studio for two years. Then we lived across from here in a one-bedroom about seven to eight years ago and stayed there for four years until we moved here. We have our history here in San Jose.

They settled in San Jose, where their three daughters were born as American citizens. Yadeel's mother and brother remain in México where they communicate via phone and webcam. However, she speaks to her mother on a daily basis due to a concern for her mother's well-being. She explains the reasons behind this uneasiness:

My mom always educated us very well and taught us that we need to take care of our grandparents. For example, I have always had that responsibility with my mom. I have that responsibility because she taught me to have that responsibility with her mom, then I have to be like that with my mom because she is also alone.

In addition, her relationship to her father has improved in the last two years. She tries to visit her father every year in Los Angeles, where he currently lives. Yadeel describes how her daughters influenced her to change the relationship she had with her father:

It helped me to think of the future of my daughters and tell them how important it is, for example, right now that I am worried about my mom and dad. For my mom, I have always been worried about, all the days I call her and with my dad that was missing. They would ask why their grandpa does not live with their grandma. I had to find the way to explain to them without saying more than they can understand. They would ask "why don't you call him like you do with grandma every day?" I tried to change that and talk to him constantly and that helps them [daughters].

Being a mother has encouraged Yadeel to cultivate a better relationship with her father.

As a child, she was affected by the way in which her mother cared for her parents, and thus, she is trying to transmit those values to her children. Although the relationships she has with her mother and father are not mutual, she is working on improving them.

Motherhood was a significant transition in Yadeel's life as it presented the opportunity to engage in the community. She began her involvement in the classroom when her oldest daughter entered pre-kindergarten by volunteering everyday, and when

she had her two younger daughters, she continued. Her involvement in the school led to her civic engagement in the community. Yadeel was introduced to the Health Science Department while she attended *Cafecitos* meetings and school events, and she was one of the parent advocates and founders of *Las Campeonas*.

Yadeel's leadership skills and experience expanded as a result of her commitment and participation in *Las Campeonas*. During her initial involvement, she helped with food, reminders, flyering, space availability, and making announcements. In addition, she was among the first *madres líderes* to make presentations to the Health Science 104 students. The skills she learned in the four years included recruiting, organizing, coordinating, and facilitating workshops. In fact, her current role in *Las Campeonas* supports the new *madres líderes* by helping them with questions regarding resources, information, members, and supplies to manage an effective group. She organized the *Grupo de Apoyo* through Catholic Charities at McKinley Elementary School, which brought nearly 30 women and men. Yadeel continues to focus on topics that contribute to the health and well-being of the family. For example, she facilitated a workshop on immigration that would benefit the well-being of immigrant families, which is not necessarily limited to disease or diet. Yadeel is also involved in local organizations such as the McKinley Bonita Association Strong Neighborhood Initiative, Family Giving Tree, CommUniverCity, Catholic Charities, City Team, Sacred Heart, Community Health Partnerships, and Latinos Against Cancer. When she was training with Latinos Against Cancer, she was offered a job, but refused the offer in order to fulfill her current job obligations. She states the following:

Latinos Against Cancer called me about an opportunity to work with them, but I couldn't take it because I already have a contract with Community Health

Partnership and its not that I cannot do both these responsibilities. But I know the responsibility of having a job with a contract, and I do not want to leave a bad impression for trying to do two things at once. I gave up that job, but in the future maybe something else will come up.

Yadeel has learned the meaning of being a good leader, so she understands the responsibilities and commitment associated with the position. She considers a good leader to be someone who helps others in need and expects nothing in return besides the experience of growing. She believes many women have attributes of leadership inside of them; they just need to discover and develop those qualities. Yadeel's leadership flourished from her participation in *Las Campeonas*, and she is now cultivating her self-growth through training sessions with Catholic Charities that have allowed her to share her experiences of leadership in the community.

Although Yadeel has a very busy weekly schedule, she juggles both her family and involvement in the school and community. She recounts her time management strategy:

Well my routine is very heavy because I am the person who does not like to leave something unfinished. I like to make time to do everything. For example, my routine is organized because I am the type of person that likes to have my schedule for the day. I am the person that, before I go to bed at night, I already have the following day planned out...I try to do the household chores [ahead of time], so it does not take time from my daughters or with an educational program for myself... I am the person whose household chores do not limit or impede on the well-being of my daughters, myself, and my family.

The way in which Yadeel organizes her household chores of washing dishes, cleaning, vacuuming, and cooking, are typically done at night after her daughters are in bed. In the morning, she wakes up at five to make breakfast, irons her daughters' uniforms, and

prepares them for school. She drops them off and either goes into work or attends meetings and training sessions until about noon. At this time, she picks up her youngest daughter from a babysitter or school (depending on the day of the week), finishes dinner and runs errands. Then, a few hours later, she picks up her older daughters, who also participate in after school programs, so she feeds them and drops them back to school. Some days are busier for Yadeel, especially when she is away until the late afternoon, helping with food distribution or other events and programs. She is able to balance both her family and community engagement by utilizing these time management strategies.

The women in Yadeel's family have inherited leadership qualities that stem from parent involvement. Yadeel explains how her mother has influenced her leadership:

My mom has always been the type of person who has been in the community. If she sees a family in need, she will help them. The community where I am from is a rancho or pueblo, so there are no community clinics. When my mom goes to the clinic, she always tries to take information back to the community. She is always involved with everything that involves helping. She has always had that communication with the community till today. There is no doubt that it has helped me a lot.

Yadeel is also a role model to her daughters, who are assuming leadership positions in the girl's health club. Her daughters' academic performance is outstanding as they obtain "Student of the Month" certificates and high test scores on standardized exams. She describes how she envisions their future:

I already visualize their future. In them seeing me active in leadership, they get motivated to move forward and they visualize themselves at the university, college, or wherever they want to be. I think that this is a motivation for the family and that this will help the family supersede. Thanks to the leadership, I

have opportunities to work, and the little projects I have completed have helped me.

Yadeel understands the sacrifice and work her mother endured as she continues the tradition of leadership in the family. Her daughters' futures are bright, seeing that they have educational and health opportunities that their mother has developed through *Las Campeonas* and her leadership roles in the community.

Sylvia Montaña Echeverría

Sylvia migrated to the United States from Michoacán, México on her own 12 years ago. She is married and has two children, who are 11 and five years old and attend McKinley Elementary School; she also has a daughter who is 18 years old that lives in México. She is currently seeking employment in the service and food industry; however, she is having difficulty finding work and finding time to balance her community involvement. Her story illustrates the hardships of family separation, belonging, and immigration, as well as the triumphs associated with leadership development.

Because her father migrated to the United States when she was five years old, Sylvia was raised by her mother and grandmother. She has a distant relationship with her father, who remarried and has a son. There are only two memories she has of him as a child, which was at the age of three when he was holding her, and then at the age of four, when he punished her severely. She cultivated a better relationship with her grandmother, who she refers to as “mother,” than with both of her parents.

Sylvia went to school and worked the majority of her childhood and adolescence. Her grandmother would prepare breakfast in the morning before school, since her mother

worked an hour earlier. During her recess, Silvia sold food on campus to students and would then rush to class. She recounts her experience:

I would get free food, so when time run out, I would always get to class with my taco of *chicharon* and water in my hand. I was always late until in fifth grade my teacher said something and had me line up in front of everyone. I told the lady [who she worked for] that I had to leave early and I would still help her with whatever she needed.

Silvia would come home with her grandmother after being released from school and proceed to do her homework while her grandmother cooked dinner because her mother worked until eight or nine o'clock. After eating, her grandmother would take a nap and go to her second job before Silvia's mother arrived. The women in the family supported the household through multiple unstable jobs.

Silvia would sometimes accompany her mother in the fields where she worked.

She recalls when she helped her mother work:

I remember my mom would harvest cotton, but you have to know how to harvest it because, if not, you would have thorns. My mother taught me how to pick it. She had a big sack made of leather that she used to fill with cotton. She would carry that and it weighed 72 kilos, while mine weighed 11 kilos and I couldn't carry it. I remember my mom carried my sack and hers. She also helped me walk because we had to jump a big *acequia* (irrigation ditch) that I could not reach to jump.

Her mother worked in the fields for most of the day, so Silvia was responsible for her younger five brothers and four sisters. Her mother would prepare the household and the children before leaving to work. Silvia learned to be responsible by taking care of her siblings.

During childhood, Silvia balanced her schooling and employment because her grandmother and mother taught her the meaning of education and hard work. She was also involved in socio-cultural programs, where she was in the flag guard, participated in parades, sang in the choir, and danced. Her mother supported her financially, while her grandmother was more involved in her performances and events. In the summer time, she would work full-time to help support the family.

Silvia finished high school and pursued a three-year technical degree as a secretary and accountant. She graduated in 1988 and worked in her career for a few years until she gave birth to her oldest daughter. She took a two-year break to raise her daughter as a single mother. When her daughter turned two years old, her grandmother took care of her, while Silvia went to work with her mother in the city. It was difficult to commute back and forth because the road was dangerous, far, and expensive. When she could visit her daughter and grandmother, she would leave everything prepared for the following work day. The living conditions were challenging, yet she managed to sacrifice for her family.

Silvia's life before coming to the U.S. was simple in terms of material goods but she felt fulfilled in the sense that she had her family. Yet, people in the community were convincing her that the U.S. had greater economic opportunities. She later realized that these were misconceptions because those who returned with new cars were able to afford such luxuries through illegal methods. Nonetheless, she left her daughter, grandmother, and mother behind to pursue these opportunities.

Although Silvia married her husband and had two more children in the U.S., she continues to feel remorse about her decision. She expresses these feelings:

If I would have known the reality of what it was like here, what I was going to discover and what I was going to know, which is that this life was not the way they said it was, I would have never come. In reality, I came here blindly. I never thought of what I was going to work in or think of where I was going to live.

She has maintained a long distance relationship with her daughter who is now grown up and has a boyfriend. Although Silvia asked her daughter for forgiveness, she continues to feel saddened and regretful; however, she acknowledges her daughter's maturity and communicates with her through phone and webcam. Her mother and brother have visas, so they are able to visit her, unfortunately, Silvia's grandmother passed away. She is comforted by the community support in which over 500 people attended her funeral services.

Silvia was also a founder of *Las Campeonas* and has learned the meaning of a good leader. She believes that a person with good leadership qualities has harmony with others and is supported by the community. Having good relationships and working well with others is an important attribute, because it helps support each other reach different levels of leadership. She asserts, "Every woman grows at her own speed and keeps growing." According to Silvia, the *hermanidad* (sisterhood) is what brings the women together even through problems and difficulties. Being realistic and optimistic of the future, she dreams of having a mobile health clinic for immigrants without insurance can receive low cost or free services, is a life-long goal. Silvia's approach to being a good leader is based on collective work that benefits and serves the community.

Her daily routine begins at 6:30 am when she prepares her children for school. Currently, Silvia is sharing a room with a single mother and four children, so she wakes her children earlier to use the restroom, since she is sharing it with another family. She

prepares breakfast and cleans while the children finish getting ready. After her meetings with *Las Campeonas*, English class, or *Grupo de Apoyo*, she runs errands around 10:00 am and by noon, she returns home and prepares lunch for her husband. Then she picks up her children who do homework and have dinner. It is difficult to keep up with this routine sometimes because she also has meetings in the evening which delay her cooking. She is also seeking employment, but is hesitant to put off her involvement and at the same time, is pressured to financially contribute to the family. However, she is motivated to learn English fluently, so she can have better job opportunities in México when she returns someday.

Teaching children, by leading the way and being an example, is an important value that Silvia teaches her two younger children. Her parenting has been largely affected by her separation from her daughter in México and as a result, she is protective and attached to her younger children. She teaches them right from wrong through legends, stories, myths, and stories, because she understands the importance of having them grow emotionally and physically healthy. In addition, she tells them about her work experience, so they will be influenced and inspired to carry on their dreams of going to college and traveling.

Developing Leadership from Childhood to Motherhood

Yadeel and Silvia are two resilient women whose stories of childhood and motherhood have shaped their leadership in the school and community. They are *madres lideres* with distinct experiences, yet a strong drive to help their families and others exceed in life. Their unique stories and experiences teach us about the power of women and the importance of engaging in grassroots organizing.

Many of the interviewees had a close woman figure during their childhood who guided and taught them their values, discipline, and morals. These older, experienced women also transmitted the value of family and the responsibility of caring for elders and small children. At an early age, they learned to juggle and balance multiple roles, while working and attending school. Essentially the women were learning about collective responsibility, which is often taken for granted in the United States, a society in which individualism and competition are highly valued. Although these immigrant women had a difficult and challenging childhood, they also developed good relationships that until they go through motherhood, would these teachings be transmitted to their children.

Motherhood is an important milestone in women's lives as they nurture and assist children to grow and develop physically and emotionally healthy. For immigrant women who leave behind children in their homeland, motherhood becomes a hardship with a difficult passage. Having to rely on family members to take the place of a mother affects the way in which a child grows up. In a vicious cycle, many single mothers are supported by immediate family to raise a child with a good sense of morality and responsibility. When mothers have multiple children, they learn how to become better parents throughout the years and understand their role in influencing and inspiring them.

Mothers are role models to children and the more involved a parent is in the community, the better the relationship and influence it has on their confidence and well-being. The purpose is to not only raise children who will follow the footprints of a parent, but who will exceed and improve their leadership as well.

Why is it important to understand women and grassroots organizing?

There are few scholars who have written about Mexican immigrant women who have acquired leadership in the community and engaged in community grassroots organizing (Jiménez 2010). Women are often excluded from the civic and political arena, and invisible in larger social movements (Pardo 1998). Gender stereotypes that characterize women as soft, passive, and docile prevent their participation in positions of power deemed for men with more qualifying attributes. Despite the fact that women play a large role in the welfare of the family and household, their power is often decentralized and subordinate to men in the political arena. These gender stereotypes and roles have confined women to affairs pertaining to the domestic sphere –home, work, and family– rather than across realms (Pardo 1998).

There are limited studies on the everyday contributions of immigrant women who engage in social and political struggles. Mary Pardo (1998) compares two Mexican women activists from Boyle Heights and Monterrey Park who collectively solved everyday problems, and larger political and environmental issues. One woman, Juana helped found *Madres Del Este de Los Angeles* (Mothers of East Los Angeles) and gained support with over 400 families. With the support of the church they defeated efforts to construct a state prison, a toxic waste facility, and an oil pipeline being built in their

community. Annie Rodriguez from Monterrey Park joined local organizers in her neighborhood that included Concerned Parents and Residents of Monterrey Park, PTA groups, neighborhood watch organizations, and Chamber of Commerce to remove a state parole office near an elementary school. After launching a campaign, informing the community, and lobbying political representatives and city officials, the office closed after three years. These two Mexican immigrant women from Los Angeles learned the leadership and organizing skills to understand power-relations in which they were able to penetrate government and redevelopment agencies. Another significant study by Hortencia Jiménez (2010) examines how Mexican immigrants in San Jose, California become involved in grassroots organizing. The organizations, *Unidos Por La Justicia* (united for justice) and *Mujeres Fuertes* (strong women), promote leadership and organizing skills around issues of immigration, health, and social services. Through *convivencias*, they help “foster a sense of belonging through which women can share common bonds based on their immigrant status, language, struggles, hopes, and aspirations” (Jiménez 2010: 449). Interestingly, these spaces allow immigrants to exchange experiences and resources that eventually lead to greater participation. Many of the women take the information they learn back to the community and provide free workshops to inform others. They become politically involved in marches and protests even though they do not have an activism background. These studies acknowledge the contributions of Mexican immigrant women who are working together to improve their families and communities’ lives.

Most of the women in the studies were mothers and although there is a misconception that motherhood will hinder activism, the opposite occurs, which is that

mothers become more involved when they have children (Jiménez 2010). Mothers are able to juggle and balance the responsibilities of the household, work, and community activism. Arlie Hochschild (1989) described the “second shift” in which women are not only working, but spend more time with children and doing household chores. They had an extra burden, yet many of these activist women have a “third shift” where they tend to leadership positions in the community. The women learn to satisfy the household demands, while also participating in marches, rallies, and workshops (Jiménez 2010; Pardo 1998). Pardo (1998:238) states, “Women may be powerful because they have responsibilities, social networks, and daily routines separate from men.” In retrospect, *madres líderes* like Yadeel and Silvia are among these women organizers that develop these skills and responsibilities as children and throughout motherhood.

Conclusion

In exploring Latino parent involvement at McKinley Elementary School, I have found that immigrant women have a leadership role and a collaborative relationship with the school. Latino parents in the past century have been perceived to undervalue education because of their lack of involvement. In this regard, the mothers at McKinley were reflecting these myths prior to *Las Campeonas*. The principal, the Health Science staff, and mothers themselves described how the parents would drop off their children and spend time with other parents outside of the school. There was a division between the parents and school, which created isolation and exclusion. Yet, what stood out was the fact that these parents were interested in the school, but did not understand the American educational system.

The literature reveals how sociocultural beliefs surrounding parent involvement marginalize parents. The Spanish speaking immigrants are expected to participate in formal school activities that contradict their notions of involvement. For instance, two forms of immigrant parents' involvement is having a "presence" in the school by attending events, open houses, and meetings and volunteering in the classroom. They are not necessarily in positions of power, but they are supportive towards the school and children. On the other hand, there are informal patterns of involvement outside of the school that are sometimes dismissed by school administrators. For instance, parents teaching a trade skill or communicating with children about their schooling experience are ways parents connect to their children's education, but these efforts are typically not acknowledged by school administrators. The areas of formal and informal parent involvement need to be explored further in immigrant communities where the population

is not participating. To this extent, schools need to reexamine their conceptions of parent involvement and reevaluate their approaches and expectations towards parents with conflicting views.

The McKinley School has an extraordinary principal, Aurora García, who has created a welcoming environment for immigrant parents who are unfamiliar with the educational system. Aurora relates to the parents because at the age of seven, she migrated from México to California, so it was important for her to create a space that was culturally sensitive to the needs of immigrants. The *Cafecitos* meetings are where parents establish a sense of belonging and learn about issues surrounding the school and community. The issues that are raised during the meetings include academic performance of students, standardized testing, safety measures, and tardy and absence policies. The issues are generally centered on children and school because their priority is the students' academic performance and well-being, which is the reason Aurora relies upon local organizations to facilitate resources for low-income families. There is also an understanding that the community issues of poverty, employment, housing, health, gangs, and violence affect students' development.

The Health Science Department with its program, *Salud Familiar en McKinley*, has established a long-term relationship with the community through health education workshops, programs, and events. Dr. Roe, chair, has been a key figure in developing this relationship based on the needs of the communities. Dr. Roe integrates her Health Science 104 students in the McKinley School and offer educational health events and workshops that fuse families, university students, and community organizations together. Therefore, the department is a vital asset to the community, which has taught the women

health information, how to develop leadership skills, and where to find local resources. Through this multi-partnership agreement between the school, parents, and university, *Las Campeonas* has successfully evolved and grown into a sustainable and vibrant group.

Las Campeonas are immigrant women whose hard work and commitment reflect the values of family, health, education, and community. Although their immediate families are central to their lives, they also form extended families with other members of the group. These relationships are driven by common experiences of immigration that create unity and a sense of belonging. As an extended family, members of the group exchange information and resources to the community through these supportive networks. *Las Campeonas* also resolve issues and take care of each other through these bonding ties. They provide a safe space to talk about personal and community issues in which the private matters become public concerns. Some of the mothers have children in México, so the group helps heal those wounds caused by the separation of families due to immigration policies. Through *Las Campeonas*, the role of *madres líderes* has grown organically as a result of the confidence, knowledge, and skills mothers gained. They are the women behind the scenes who prepare and organize the workshops, classes, and events to sustain the group. The *madres líderes* are redefining leadership in the community, so that any one can develop the skills to organize and coordinate health educational workshops for the community.

It is important to note how women are also molded by their experiences of childhood and motherhood. Women are not born leaders; they build these qualities throughout their lives. The possibility that everyone can be a potential leader illustrates the importance of community organizing. Mothers can potentially become outstanding

role models for children if they demonstrate and encourage a tradition of leadership in the community.

Furthermore, I have identified the following recommendations for the community-university partnership and *Las Campeonas* based on my participant-observation and interviews.

1. Establish Positions and Roles for Members.

Create a structure where members can rotate and experience different positions and roles within the group. Currently, the women leaders and Health Science student assistant are responsible for a multitude of tasks while other members have ambiguous positions. Developing tasks and responsibilities where members can explore an array of skills to build long-term involvement from older and newer members. This will help improve commitments from members and build better relationships with each other by facilitating positions and roles.

2. Create Programs to Support Men.

To address the gender discrepancy it is necessary to craft spaces for men's participation. One way is to provide support groups where men can discuss issues that are pertinent to their lives and developing collective means to nurture alternatives and solutions. Another way is to offer educational programs and workshops to improve their health and life skills. These pilot programs may also be the groundwork for long-term leadership institutions from which individuals and the community at large may be empowered.

3. Develop a Sustainable Model.

Create and develop a sustainable model where community-university partnership nurtures *Las Campeonas* to independently sustain itself. Women indicated how vulnerable *Las*

Campeonas is without the university; therefore, it is crucial to strengthen their foundation as budget cuts at the university and reduction in social services threaten the group's existence. In the future, the group should extensively develop new and alternative ways to fund, recruit, and retain members.

4. Incorporate Culturally Relevant Workshops.

In order to address the needs of this diverse community, workshops should be approached in a culturally relevant way. Specific efforts need to be made to bridge the Mexican and Vietnamese community. Incorporating team building activities and potluck gatherings can break these cultural barriers.

5. Develop Curriculum and Provide Leadership Training.

Las Campeons may strongly benefit from compiling and planning a collaborative curriculum. Exploring members' creative capacities set can expand and forge a dynamic curriculum grounded in their members' skills. Secondly, provide leadership training sessions by community organizers or coordinate a retreat to build teamwork and strengthen relationships. Have members collectively brainstorm ideas to improve the community-university partnership and group. Leadership trainings can be facilitated by former leaders who want to maintain their participation in the group.

6. Continue Oral Histories Project of *Madres Líderes*.

Collect the oral histories of women leaders in the community to pass on a tradition of civic engagement. For this research project, women were inspired and empowered to share their stories with family and community members. The following step could be to organize workshops for women to document their own oral histories using digital recorders and camcorders to create a greater sense of ownership.

These recommendations are meant to assist *Las Campeonas*, the Health Science Department and the McKinley School. Often times the work of local organizations goes unnoticed until research and projects reveal the significant everyday contributions. This is one valuable skill applied anthropology has to offer, which is the ability to document and share the stories of extraordinary people in the community. My experience at McKinley Elementary School has revealed the compassion and dedication of Mexican immigrant mothers fighting for better educational and health opportunities for their families and communities.

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