

On the Border of a Precipice for a Paradigm Shift:  
Navigating Tensions to Cultivate Equitable Collaboration in Family-School Partnerships

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**Abstract**

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Drawing on an applied tensional analysis (Mease, 2019), equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020), and transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), this study examined the complexities of tensions and how the enacted response strategies undermined or fostered more equitable approaches for collaboration within a family-school partnership to improve students' early learning outcomes. This dissertation used a qualitative single-case study design to explore the interactions within a community-based family-school partnership comprised of parents, community members, community-based non-profit organizations, school district staff, administrators and elected leaders, research institutions, and philanthropy. Data collected from the Summer 2022 to Spring 2023 consisted of more than 95 hours of observations and qualitative interviews focused on understanding how tensions emerged and how tensions were addressed within the Yorbas Early Learning Initiative (YELI) family-school partnerships.

Findings suggest how the response strategies to repair tensions can be well-intentioned and equity-driven while also unintentionally reinforcing deficit-oriented perspectives of parents and incorporating school-centric paradigms and strategies that maintain unilateral power dynamics between schools and families (Ishimaru, 2020). By better understanding how tensions emerge, and more importantly, how our responses to these tensions may covertly conform to traditional, dominant, deficit-oriented, school-centric paradigms, researchers and practitioners can learn and shift response strategies in ways that can foster more equitable approaches for collaboration.

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### **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my mom, Baudelia Lara and my dad, Armando Lara, may he rest in peace. Papá, I wish I could have finished this dissertation sooner so that you were still here to see me graduate from the University of Washington.

Thank you both for all the love and support.

This degree is for you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Enthusiasm for cross-sector collaborations, such as family-school partnerships, has been increasing over the last decade. The appeal of the notion that parents and families, in partnership with schools, play critical roles in student learning and improving student outcomes— although not new—continues to captivate strong interest from funders, policymakers, universities, and public agencies (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ishimaru, 2020; Kania & Kramer, 2011). This interest has resulted in massive investments in strategic cross-sector collaborations by philanthropy and federal and state governments, such as Promise Neighborhoods ([promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov](http://promiseneighborhoods.ed.gov)), California’s Community Schools Partnership Program (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/g/hs/ccspp.asp>), the California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities Initiative ([calendow.org](http://calendow.org)), First 5 Los Angeles’ Best Start Initiative ([first5la.org](http://first5la.org)), First 5 Orange County’s Engaged Neighborhoods Initiative ([first5oc.org](http://first5oc.org)), and many more. Cross-sector collaborations for educational equity are often described as formal strategic partnerships that bring together parents and families, schools, community-based nonprofit organizations, advocacy organizations, public and private agencies, and foundations around a common vision, aligned strategies, and shared approaches to achieve large-scale student outcomes (Henig, et. al., 2015; Ishimaru, 2020; Kania & Kramer, 2011). There are several types of cross-sector collaborations focused on educational equity, including family-school partnerships, Community Schools, and Promise Neighborhoods’ cradle-to-career initiatives (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>). Yet, despite the increasing enthusiasm and investment in cross-sector collaborations for educational equity, we know that efforts to bring parents, families, organizations, and schools into collaborative spaces as equal

stakeholders often tend to fall short of improving large-scale student outcomes, especially in low-income, marginalized, Latinx communities (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Ishimaru, 2020).

As researchers examine the complexities and limitations of cross-sector collaborations, emerging insights are helping policymakers, funders, organizations, and agencies better understand and strategize how to address challenges that have historically and continuously undermined these collaborations' success (Holmgren, 2015; Ishimaru, 2020; Kania, et. al., 2021). For example, Ishimaru (2020) found how cross-sector collaborations can create a sense of 'collabitation,' a term used to explain when organizational partners are competing for resources, recognition, and opportunities. Kania, et. al. (2021) explained how the failure to center equity within Collective Impact initiatives has undermined efforts to achieve large-scale population-level results. Specifically, Kania, et. al. (2021) argue that cross-sector collaborations fail to center equity when focusing on large-scale educational policy and systems changes without "shifting relationships, power dynamics, and mental models can lead to irrelevant, ineffective, unaccountable, and unsustainable solutions" (p.42). Research on family-school partnerships has illuminated how family engagement strategies that attempt to shift power dynamics and center parents and families as experts and decision-makers, often produce tensions that undermine efforts for equitable collaboration (Bernal & Aleman, Jr., 2017; Ishimaru, 2020; Kania, et. al., 2021; Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

An example of this paradox occurs when collaboration strategies that bring low-income, Spanish-speaking, immigrant Latinx parents and families to the table with nonprofit community organizations, school districts, universities, and city and county agencies, are often embedded with deficit-oriented assumptions that perceive and relegate non-dominant parents, defined as traditionally working-class and marginalized parents in low-income communities of color, to be

and operate as passive, receptive, dependent, and accommodationist roles that reinforce nonlinear power dynamics and school-centric paradigms for collaboration (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Bolivar and Chrispeels, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ishimaru, 2020; Oakes and Rogers, 2006; Olivos, 2006; Orozco, 2008; Putnam et al., 2016; Warren et al., 2011). Particularly, non-dominant parents are often asked to participate and support outreach efforts for pre-determined and existing programs, events, fundraisers, fairs, and workshops of which they had no or a limited role in determining or helping shape the goals, objectives, and strategies. A common strategy in education-focused cross-sector collaborations involves parent leadership development and capacity building programs. As parents strengthen their leadership skills, knowledge, and competencies, however, tensions often emerge when the emerging parent leaders identify priorities that do not align with pre-established agendas of funders, agencies, and schools. A concrete example of how these types of tensions emerge took place within First 5 Los Angeles' Best Start Initiative (an early childhood initiative), specifically in Southeast Los Angeles from 2011 to 2016. Several hundred emerging parents and community leaders who were also actively involved in a grassroots and civic leadership capacity-building initiative pushed back and resisted several pre-determined priorities and strategies from First 5 Los Angeles. When tensions emerge due to goals and strategies focused on shifting power relations or diversifying conventional decision-making structures and processes, organizational and system leaders often respond by reinforcing asymmetrical power and dominance through racialized institutional logics that bolster school-centric solutions, or in some cases, systems leaders end up abandoning the collaborative and investment (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Ishimaru, 2020; Kania, et. al., 2021). Therefore, as research continues advancing our understanding of the challenges and tensions within family-school partnerships, I argue that we must better

understand how to respond to tensions that emerge within collaborative spaces that seek to shift power relations and how response strategies can foster more equitable approaches for collaboration.

We know tension is inevitable in all collaborative settings infused with asymmetrical power relations, such as when funders, agencies, and schools pursue family-school partnerships that center non-dominant parents and families as leaders and experts (Cooper, 2021; Ishimaru; 2020; Mease, 2019; Putnam et al., 2016). Putnam, et al. (2016) define tensions as “stress, anxiety, discomfort, or tightness in making choices, responding to, and moving forward in organizational situations” (p. 68). Moreover, Putnam et al. (2016) suggest that tensions usually emerge through person to person and entity to person interactions. Research on tension has traditionally focused on understanding how to identify, tolerate, and respond to tensions; less analyses addresses the idea that tensions may function as possibilities for innovation and transformative turning points that can help us better understand how to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration (Cooper, 2021; Mease, 2019). In this sense, tensions can be described as those critical moments and opportunities when family-school partnerships are vulnerable to decisions and actions that can potentially transform or undermine family-school partnerships (Cooper, 2021). In other words, tensions are not just situations that need to be tolerated. Tensions should be understood and approached as critical moments and opportunities within family-school partnerships that can unintentionally reinforce dominant asymmetrical power relations and school-centric paradigms, or more importantly, foster more equitable approaches to collaboration.

To examine the complexity of tensions and the response strategies to address them, I conducted a case study of a family-school partnership situated in a working-class, marginalized,

and largely immigrant Latinx community in Southern California. The Yorbas Early Learning Initiative (a pseudonym) is a family-school partnership founded in 2016 and is described as a network of parents, caregivers, and residents working closely with nonprofit organizations, elementary schools, universities, and city and county agencies to create home, school, and neighborhood environments that promote the well-being of children 0 to 9 years old and their families across the city of Yorbas, California. A pseudonym was used to protect the identity of the school district, organizations, and research participants across the Yorbas Early Learning Initiative (YELI) family-school partnership. I entered this case study with a pre-existing 13-year relationship with Armando, the founder of the YELI family-school partnership, where I had the privilege of not just being one of his undergraduate students as a Chicano and Latino studies major, but also working with him in the planning, development and implementation of numerous cross-sector collaborations across Los Angeles County and Orange County. I share this brief background because it was through my experiences supporting the planning, design, and facilitation of cross-sector collaborations that I experienced how tensions impacted and undermined the goals and strategies of numerous partnerships seeking to advance educational equity in low-income and marginalized Latinx communities. In particular, my experiences over the last 13 years working in low-income marginalized Latinx communities, such as Southeast Los Angeles where I was born and raised, influenced and shaped my interest and decision to better understand how tensions and our responses to tensions can help us advance efforts for equitable collaboration instead of undermining the impact and investments in our Latinx communities.

Through this dissertation study, I explored how tensions emerged and how tensions were addressed to better understand if and which types of response strategies can help foster more

equitable approaches for collaboration. Specifically, to discern and analyze tensions and response strategies within the YELI family-school partnership, I draw on equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020), transformational resistance (2001), and applied tensional analysis (Mease, 2019). I used Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration framework to discern where tensions were more likely to emerge within the YELI family-school partnership. I adapted Mease's (2019) applied tensional analysis as a methodological framework to analyze how organizational, social, and historical contexts may have shaped key tensions and enabled or constrained the response strategies used to navigate those tensions. Transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001) was used to analyze the possibilities and limitation of response strategies in fostering a more equitable approach for collaboration.

### **Research Questions**

The dissertation explored the following research questions:

1. How do tensions infused in asymmetrical power dynamics emerge within the YELI family-school partnership?
2. How did the family-school partnership leaders respond to and address the tensions?
3. How, if at all, did the family-school partnership leaders' response strategies help foster or undermine more equitable approaches to collaboration?

My dissertation findings highlight two different kinds of response strategies. First, I describe how two enacted response strategies undermined equitable collaboration by indirectly reinforcing a traditional, conventional, and dominant school-centric paradigm. Second, I examine how three response strategies helped foster more equitable collaboration by shifting the YELI family-school partnership toward a community-centered paradigm. Third, I offer a conceptual

framework to distinguish between school and community-centered approaches to navigate and address tensions to cultivate more equitable approaches for collaboration.

### **Dissertation Roadmap**

In the chapter that follows, I frame this case study in the literature of family engagement, shared leadership and educational organizing leadership, transformational resistance, and equitable collaboration. In the same chapter, I describe the study's conceptual framework, which draws on equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020), transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal 2001), and applied tensional analysis (Mease, 2019). Chapter Three outlines the qualitative single-case study research methods I used to examine and analyze the complexities of tensions, and the response strategies to address the tensions in the YELI family-school partnership. Chapter Four provides a contextual description of the family-school partnership and five key tensions analyzed in this study. Chapter Five describes two response strategies and how they reinforced conventional power asymmetries and undermined equitable collaboration. Chapter Six narrates how three response strategies fostered equitable approaches for collaboration. Chapter Seven discusses the implications of the findings and proposes a repertoire of response strategies to inform partnership leaders, practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and funders on how to navigate and respond to tensions in ways that can cultivate equitable collaboration.

## **Chapter 2: Informing Literature & Conceptual Framework**

Family-school partnerships and cross-sector partnerships are built on the premise that tackling large-scale educational inequities requires the collaboration of multiple stakeholders, including parents, families, schools, community organizations, research institutions, government agencies, businesses, and philanthropy (Henig et. al., 2015; Horsford & Vazquez Heilig, 2014; Ishimaru, 2020; Kania, et al., 2021). Specifically, policymakers, funders, and agencies have garnered increasing enthusiasm for cross-sector collaborations due to the acknowledgement that schools alone cannot solve historic, social, and economic inequities. Yet, despite the promising rhetoric of cross-sector collaboration, research suggests that family-school partnerships that attempt to center parents, families, and communities as equal stakeholders often experience tensions that undermine their success (Ishimaru, 2020; Kania, et al., 2021). Fortunately, the literature on family engagement, grassroots leadership development, and educational organization can help us better understand what contributes to the emergence of tensions within family-school partnership and shed light into possible strategies to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020). Research on family-school partnerships increasingly implies the need to reimagine the roles of low-income marginalized families in schools while attending to asymmetrical power relations within collaborative efforts for educational policy and systems change (Auerbach, 2010; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Freelon, 2018; Ishimaru, 2017; Johnson, 2012, Oakes, et. al., 2006; Olivos, 2006; Olivos, et. al., 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). This focus on reimagining community-school relations has led to special attention within the literature of educational organizing and grassroots leadership to better understand collaborative processes for improving student outcomes. Educational organizing is defined as a process whereby organizing efforts focus on building capacity and

community power of stakeholders to improve educational outcomes while also addressing key social and economic challenges faced by low-income families (Warren & Mapp, 2011). In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the literature on family engagement, grassroots leadership, and educational organizing.

### *Family Engagement and Educational Organizing*

The conventional literature on family involvement describes parents helping their students develop reading skills, checking homework assignments, supervising and monitoring how their children spend their time out of school, talking with their children about what they are learning in school, attending school events, going to parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering in the classroom or school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ishimaru, 2020; Oakes, et al., 2008; Rodela & Bertrand, 2022). A popular example of an involved parent usually entails a parent helping organize the annual school bake sale or other fundraising event. Research on family involvement suggests parents play a significant role in student outcomes, especially in schools that serve working-class communities that are linguistically and culturally diverse (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Bryk, et al., 2010, Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Map, 2002; Jeynes, 2012; Ishimaru, et al., 2016; Olivos, et. al., 2011; Orozco, 2008). For example, Jeynes' (2012) meta-analysis of the efficacy of different types of parental involvement programs geared toward urban students found that parental involvement programs were associated with higher student academic outcomes. Yet, Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru (2016) uplift how traditional family involvement policies and practices continue relegating parents and families to passive, dependent, and accommodationist roles, which serve to maintain the status quo. Parents, families, and communities of color are commonly labeled as part of the problem instead of assets for educational change (Oakes, et. al., 2008). Often, schools (administrators and teachers) define

the goals, outcomes, and role of parent involvement, which reinforces schools' values, assumptions, priorities, and status quo (Olivos, 2006). This perspective of family involvement is concerning because it legitimizes specific parent and family activities, behaviors, and attitudes based on a deficit-oriented perspective of working-class, marginalized families (Auerbach, 2010; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Olivos, 2006; Olivos, et. al., 2011). Often, this view translates into schools creating family involvement opportunities wherein low-income Latinx parents are expected to be openly, uncritically, and submissively supportive of schooling; if low-income Latinx parents do not get involved and behave as expected, schools label them as problematic, ignorant, incompetent, and unreliable (Olivos, 2006; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010).

In addition, researchers consistently highlight how asymmetrical power relations are “baked” in the family-school interactions (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Freire, 1970; Ishimaru, 2017; Ishimaru, 2020; Johnson, 2012; Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006; Olivos, 2006). Johnson (2012) critiqued how Epstein's (1995) conventional model of family involvement clashes with how Black and brown families define, navigate, and experience schooling. Johnson (2012) explained:

It has been my experience as a parent of color living in a multicultural and urban working-class area of the United States that Epstein's model, which is often cited by school officials as the definitive word in parent involvement, is not fully appropriate or comprehensive for our needs. It also fails to take into consideration our potential and draws on the assumption that the school must always be the one to bring us in, to entertain us, and to provide for us. In other words, this model disempowers parents of color from the potential we have to create change in our schools. (p. 150)

Here, Johnson (2012) implies how traditional and conventional family involvement frameworks have enabled schools to create pre-determined boundaries that define acceptable parent involvement interactions based on a traditional, conventional, paradigm that is both deficit-oriented and school-centric. Particularly, Johnson (2012) suggests that Epstein's model neglects the role parents and community leaders can serve to hold school systems accountable, and lacks the mechanisms to strengthen proactive community and social resources to deal with community issues—such as unsafe streets, domestic violence, overcrowded housing, etc.

It is no secret that when working-class families of color do not engage in socially acceptable activities, behaviors, and attitudes, they are often labeled as problematic, deviant, and disruptive troublemakers (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). For example, Johnson (2012) describes how empowered Black and brown parents often do not sit well with educators and how educators tended to report parents as being 'harsh' if they asked specific questions about a school's quality of teaching or resource adequacy, and/or if they asked to see teachers' lesson plans and rubric assessments. In contrast, Lareau and Horvat (1999) explain how when White middle-class parents ask specific questions about quality teachers, adequate resources, and rubric assessments, their behaviors are labeled as appropriate and legitimate. According to Lareau and Horvat (1999), being white is an advantage and whiteness "represents a largely hidden cultural resource that facilitates white parents' compliance with the standard of deferential and positive parent involvement in school" (p.49). Johnson (2012) suggests that whiteness is hidden in culturally normative behaviors and family involvement narratives that have historically and continually legitimized the voice and power of school officials and that stifle the rights and due process of parents and families of color. Moreover, Doucet (2011) challenges mainstream definitions of family involvement by disputing the assumption that community-school partnerships are

desirable and beneficial for students' academic success and well-being. In her study of parent involvement with Haitian immigrant families, Doucet (2011) shows how families played an active and deliberate role in creating distance between the worlds of home and school due to the parents' ambivalent feelings about U.S. culture and the fear of losing a cultural connection with their children through assimilation. Doucet (2011) and other scholars (Baquedano-Lopez, et al., 2013) contend that there is a popular misconception, especially among educators, policymakers, and middle-class White families, that since parents are intentionally creating distance between the worlds of home and school, they must simply not care or value their children's education.

Research on family engagement implies the growing need to reimagine the roles of low-income Latinx families in schools while attending to the asymmetrical power relations (Auerbach, 2010; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Freelon, 2018; Ishimaru, 2017; Johnson, 2012, Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006, Olivos, 2006; Olivos, et. al., 2011). This focus on reimagining community-school relations has led to emergence of the literature's special attention on educational organizing, which contends that persistent structural inequality in schools is best addressed by those who endure and navigate them daily, and therefore it is these people who must organize and work collectively for educational policy and systems changes (Mediratta & Smith, 2001, Ishimaru, 2012, Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister, 2009, Nygreen, 2017, Shirley, 2009, Warren, 2005). Educational organizing has a clear intent and emphasis on strengthening the capacity of parents and families to play an effective and productive role in restructuring power relations and fostering equitable family-school collaborations (Warren, 2005). At the center of educational organizing efforts lies the goal of building power. This power-building process often entails cultivating parent leaders with the capacity to identify, define, and prioritize students' and schools' key educational needs and issues, examine and understand the root causes

of educational inequities, develop strong and trusting networks, and build authentic collaboration with other parents and educators (Ginwright & James, 2002; Ishimaru, 2014). Building power also includes strengthening families and communities to develop a community-centered educational agenda that engages and influences decision-making processes, and holds elected officials, administrators, and educators accountable for advancing educational equity (Ginwright & James, 2002; Glickman & Scally, 2008).

The literature also highlights the contradictory rhetoric concerning parent engagement, which is lately dependent on the way a parent engages the school rather than the quality of that engagement (Baquedano-Lopez, et al., 2013). For example, parents are often labeled as central figures in student achievement when they support school-centered agendas. On the other hand, parents are labeled as problematic, destructive, and harmful when their engagement critically examines, resists, and challenges the status quo and dominant deficit-oriented assumptions embedded within oppressive and racist schooling systems. “Problematic” parents are frequently silenced by educators who claim to understand, value, and promote the importance of centering parent voices to achieve educational equity. Thus, the contradictory rhetoric and experiences outlined in the family engagement and educational organizing literature demonstrate how collaborative spaces that attempt to center parents may be ripe environments for tensions to emerge for all participants or stakeholders. Tension is inevitable within family-school partnerships infused with asymmetrical power relations, untested assumptions, hidden agendas, and practitioners with limited understanding and competency to navigate such tensions toward more equitable approaches for collaboration.

The community and educational organizing literatures underscore the idea that improving educational outcomes relies on shared leadership (Ishimaru, 2013; Ishimaru, 2014; Ishimaru,

2020; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). Shared leadership is characterized as a form of collaboration and an expanded style of leadership, implying a departure from traditional, hierarchical, top-down notions of leadership premised upon an individual person as the sole source of expertise (Ishimaru, 2013, Mayrowetz, 2008). Within equitable family-school partnerships, shared leadership concentrates on expanding the roles of historically marginalized and non-dominant parents and families as leaders with the expertise, capacity, and responsibility for guiding and improving educational outcomes (Ishimaru, 2013; Maryowetz, 2008). In this context, shared leadership is intertwined with grassroots leadership; this combination counterbalances top-down hierarchical leadership styles, recentering the role of non-dominant parents, families, and community residents as critical leaders and decision-makers who are co-responsible for taking collective action in leading educational change efforts (Bell, 2013; Ishimaru, 2014; Lester & Kezar, 2012). Although most definitions of shared leadership suggest the ‘titular’ leader is no longer the singular source of expertise and agency, this leader retains a critical role in shared leadership approaches (Ishimaru, 2020). Under a shared leadership approach, the ‘titular’ leader focuses more on developing productive relationships, facilitating collective agency, creating a common culture of expectations, and fostering opportunities for shared leadership and decision-making, while helping build a shared vision for change (Harris, 2004; Ishimaru, 2020). In these contexts, shared leadership seeks to tap into the wealth of knowledge and expertise of nondominant parents, families, and community members, as well as teachers and educational leaders; this leadership is focused on increasing commitment through trust and relationship building to ultimately improve educational outcomes (Borregard, 2019).

Community and educational organizing frameworks parallel shared leadership and grassroot leadership practices by centering the needs of building relationships, capacity building,

facilitating collaboration, and fostering opportunities for leadership across stakeholders (Warren & Mapp, 2011; Ishimaru, 2020). Grassroots leadership is described as an action-learning process, centered on team building and collaboration, mutual trust, reciprocal relationships, dialogue, practice, and reflection (Bell, 2013; Boehm & Staples, 2005; Escala Rabadan, et al., 2011; Zachary, 2000). Similarly, shared leadership practices focus on building trust through relationships with parents, and developing the leadership capacity of parents, and providing opportunities for them to actually lead (Welton & Freelon, 2018).

In her research on how to build leadership capacity of school principals to collaborate with non-dominant parents and communities of color, Ishimaru (2013) argues that educational organizing frameworks may help us better understand how shared leadership unfolds and plays out within family-school partnerships. The educational organizing literature centers the voices, expertise, and work *with*—not on behalf of—non-dominant parents and families to increase their power and capacity to lead efforts to improve educational achievement (Welton & Freelon, 2018). Educational organizing envisions the ways that parents, families, and community members should also be considered school leaders (Welton & Freelon, 2018). The educational organizing literature highlights the common tactics and approaches that leaders employ to bring people together to strengthen collaboration by building trust and relationships. There is, however, a need to understand how educational organizing principles translate within family-school partnerships, especially in response to tensions that threaten to undermine the fabrics that hold collaborations together (Ishimaru, 2020).

A key guiding principle in educational organizing contends that persistent educational inequities are best addressed by the families that they directly impact, and it is, therefore, the families who must leverage their collective power to disrupt and transform educational systems,

policies, and practices that regurgitate inequities (Mediratta & Smith, 2001; Ishimaru, 2020, Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister, 2009; Nygreen, 2017; Shirley, 2009, Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). Educational organizing frameworks, at their core, concentrate on building relationships, trust, and the collective power of low-income and marginalized families (Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011). This power-building process involves cultivating parent leaders with the skills and capacity to identify and define educational and community priorities, while also developing trust and relationships, to authentically engage in collaborative strategies to improve educational outcomes (Ginwright & James, 2002; Ishimaru, 2020; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Shirley, 1997; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). By applying a community organizing framework to one's leadership approach and practices, organizing leaders can challenge deficit-oriented norms and assumptions that harm and negate authentic and trusting relationships with nondominant parents and communities, while also helping envision ways nondominant families can be situated as critical decision-makers (Ishimaru, 2020; Welton & Freelon, 2018).

Educational organizing frameworks embody strategies, practices, and techniques that attempt to strengthen collaboration by building on the existing relations and connections amongst parents, families, and organizations (Warren & Mapp, 2011). However, an educational organizing framework is not just about bringing parents, families, organizations, and schools together. Rather, educational organizing efforts purposefully draw from and build on the shared history, geography, culture, and identities that already exist among parents, families, and communities to forge strong bonds, trust, and relationships (Warren & Mapp, 2011). In other words, an educational organizing framework is not a cookie-cutter or one-size-fits-all technique that can be copied and pasted into various collaborative spaces in the same way with expectation

of similar outcomes (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Educational organizing must be grounded in a community's unique geographic, social, economic, and historical contexts. Thus, educational organizing strategies should be context-specific and may look different across multiple contexts (Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Educational organizing strategies often begin by building trust and relationships amongst a group of parents, families, and organizations to assess whether there is a collective interest in developing and pursuing a shared vision of improved educational outcomes. Building relationships starts with having conversations where parents, families, and organizers can share stories, opinions, and experiences, while seeking to identify commonalities and issues that can be addressed through collective action. Organizing leaders draw upon pre-existing networks to convene with parents, families, and educators to discuss the root causes of key issues and to identify potential opportunities for collective action for winnable victories. For example, organizing leaders may reach out to faith-based groups, parent-teacher associations, informal neighborhood associations, early care and education professionals, and community-based non-profit organizations to form the foundation for educational organizing. More importantly, educational organizing frameworks often involve parent and family leadership to develop strategies focused on strengthening the skills, knowledge, and capacity of parents. Educational organizing strategies contrast with the traditional, conventional, and deficit-oriented-meets-school-centric roles designated to parents, which presume that parents are schools' passive clients who are only interested in bake sales, volunteering opportunities, workshops on how to a better parent, and how to enrich their children's learning (Shirley, 2010). On the other hand, educational organizing frameworks strive to shift power dynamics by empowering the

marginalized and disenfranchised parents and families concerned to take collective action to advance educational equity (Shirley, 2010).

Educational organizing strategies are often trying to find new and creative ways to strengthen the leadership skills and capacity of parents and families toward improving educational outcomes (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Orozco, 2008). Use of parent leadership development strategies is a common tactic to strengthen the capacity of parents to engage in family-school partnerships and lead key projects and activities (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Ishimaru, 2020; Orozco, 2008). However, school-centric parent leadership strategies often focus on increasing parent involvement and participation, in local schools and at home, by asking parents to volunteer and fundraise, attend parent-teacher conferences, and participate in parenting workshops. In contrast, community-centered parent leadership development programs often focus on building and strengthening parents' leadership and advocacy capacity to address the needs of students, families, schools, and communities. Community-centered parent leadership development programs aim to empower parents to be decision-makers and effective partners with schools in their children's educational experience and outcomes. These parent leadership programs have been shown to provide parents with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies to build social and cultural capital, and more importantly, to engage in power-building strategies with other stakeholders in their child's formal education.

Empowerment is essentially about establishing and gaining power. Although theorists offer varying definitions, most scholars tend to agree that empowerment is a process (Carr, 2003; Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010; Freire, 1970; Gutierrez 1995; Kieffer, 1984; Pigg, 2002; Rappaport, 1984; Staples, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995). In particular, Cattaneo and Chapman (2010), articulate the empowerment process as:

“An iterative process in which a person who lacks power sets a personally meaningful goal oriented toward increasing power, takes action toward that goal, and observes and reflects on the impact of this action, drawing on his or her evolving self-efficacy, knowledge, and competence related to the goal” (p. 647).

The literature suggest that the most effective leadership development programs are those that mirror and reflect the empowerment process (Ayon & Lee, 2009; Pigg, 2002; Zachary, 2008).

### *Grassroots Leadership*

Grassroots leaders are characterized as specific types of leaders who emerge from marginalized and disenfranchised neighborhoods and communities, and who actively and collectively take action to address community needs and problems and improve the quality of life and life outcomes for their families and neighborhoods. Grassroots leadership is defined as a type of leadership that counterbalances top-down leadership, focuses attention on community issues that are often overlooked or ignored, contributes to the betterment of community life, improves the quality of relationships across all stakeholders in the community, and advances social justice (Bell, 2013; Escala Rabadán, et al., 2011). Grassroots community leaders are often characterized as enthusiastic and passionate about improving their neighborhoods and communities (Ouellete, Lazear, & Chambers, 1999). Yet, there are challenges that emerging Latino/a grassroots leaders face, including lack of time, lack of capacity, lack of financial resources, low formal educational attainment, low levels of formal English language literacy, and having to deal with dominant institutional systems with top-down leadership structures and manipulative political agendas (Bell, 2013; Escala Rabadán, et al., 2011). Emerging Latino/a grassroots leaders face an uphill battle as they work to address the needs and issues in their communities without any or sufficient resources to influence local government decision-making

processes.

A key role of grassroots leadership development efforts center on the development and organization of effective and productive collaborations and partnerships to address community needs and problems (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2005). The literature highlights the importance of these collaborative approaches through action learning processes centered on team building and collaboration, mutual trust, reciprocal relationships, dialogue, practice, and reflection (Bell, 2013, Boehm & Staples, 2005, Escala Rabadán, et al., 2011, Lester & Kezar, 2012, Ouellete, Lazear, & Chambers, 1999; Zachary, 2000). An extensive body of research has produced a comprehensive set of definitions, approaches, insights, and recommendations informing the design and implementation of grassroots leadership and collaborative learning spaces. For example, the literature highlights the importance of creating highly participatory and engaging learning processes; of locating power in the collective and articulating groups responsibilities and ground rules; of establishing a culture of participation that creates safe learning spaces of respect and validation of personal experiences; of skillful facilitation that builds a sense of equality and solidarity; and development of a community of learners built on mutual support, mutual respect, and trust (Boehm & Staples, 2005, Rivera-Salgado, et al., 2004, Zachary, 2000). Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2005) also highlight the importance of designing highly participatory and safe action-learning processes that focus on strengthening individual leadership skills, organizational capacity and effectiveness, and knowledge and capacity to identify and prioritize key issues and strategies to address local needs and problems.

Together, the insights and principles embedded across the literature on grassroots leadership, shared leadership, and educational organizing are increasingly informing and guiding the design and implementation of equity-focused family-school partnerships. Particularly, to

foster more equitable approaches for collaboration, parent leadership development and capacity building programs are being grounded in the principles of grassroots leadership, shared leadership, and educational organizing theories. Moreover, this informing literature challenges traditional and deficit-oriented notions of empowerment that presume parents lack power and are empty buckets waiting to be filled with it by the school or other entities/actors (Freire, 1970). Rather, the literature implies the need to redefine and reimagine the notion of empowerment through the principles embedded within grassroots leadership, shared leadership, and educational organizing theories. Rhetorically, the insights and principles within these bodies of literature are at the root of equity-oriented family-school partnerships. In practice, however, applying these principles within family-school partnerships is a recipe for tensions to emerge. Put differently, I argue that tensions are destined to emerge in these settings. Therefore, family-school partnership leaders and practitioners must understand and be prepared to navigate the inevitable tensions that emerge from collaborative models and approaches that resist traditional, conventional, and dominant asymmetrical power dynamics. In summary, this informing literature illuminates the contextual and conceptual spaces through which equity-oriented family-school partnerships are operating in and elucidate the inevitability of emerging tension(s) due to the explicit attention to navigating and addressing asymmetrical power relations.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This case study engages three theoretical frameworks: equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020), applied tensional analysis (Mease, 2019), and transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), to discern how tensions emerge within the YLI family-school partnership and analyze the response strategies employed in navigating these tensions within the partnership. This study draws on Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration as a guiding framework to discern

where tensions or transformative ruptures (Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017) are more likely to emerge in family-school partnerships. Mease's (2019) applied tensional analysis framework informed the analytical strategy used to examine the complexities of the tensions within the YELI family-school partnership. Building on both equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020) and applied tensional analysis (Mease, 2019), this study draws from transformational resistance framework (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001) to analyze the enacted response strategies used to navigate and address the tensions and ascertain which response strategies undermined and fostered more equitable approaches for collaboration in the YELI family-school partnership.

### **Using an Equitable Collaboration Framework to Identify Tension**

The equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2020) is an approach that emerged from the need to shift away from the longstanding deficit-oriented school-led family engagement approaches and practices that reinforce status quo relationships and roles between educators and parents (Warren, et al., 2011). Conceptualized by Ishimaru (2020), the equitable collaboration framework intends to help educational leaders understand how to shift from traditional school-centered family engagement practices that: label and view parents from a deficit lens; emphasize goals and interventions to address alleged defects or deficiencies in students, families, and communities; focus on technical changes such as scaling existing practices or leveraging existing relationships; and attempt to avoid tension while focusing on schools as isolated from their communities. Building from critical race theory and decolonizing theories, and drawing from community organizing and social cultural learning theories, Ishimaru (2017) conceptualizes the equitable collaboration framework through four dimensions: (a) systemic-change goals within a culture of share responsibility, (b) adaptive strategies that build capacity and relationships of a broad range of stakeholders, (c) the role of non-dominant parents as experts and educational

leaders who contribute to and help shape the agenda, and (d) an understanding that educational reform is inherently a political process and exercise in civic engagement to address key issues in the broader community.

In other words, an equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2020) involves families and educators sharing responsibility for improving student outcomes; involves flexible and adaptive approaches and strategies that build and strengthen the leadership capacity of parents, educators, and school leaders to address inequities; compels educators and school leaders to change their deficit-oriented perspectives of families in order to see them as educational leaders and experts; and requires that all stakeholders involved understand that schools are situated within and shaped by broader historical, socio-economic, and political contexts and forces, and thus efforts to improve educational outcomes should also address broader issues in the community, and vice versa. Importantly, the equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2020) reassigns the role of families from passive clients to that of educational leaders, shifts away from schools being at the center of family engagement practices, and focuses on strengthening the leadership capacity and collective power of nondominant families and educators to collaboratively improve educational outcomes (Ishimaru, 2017).

For educational and organizational leaders to meaningfully adopt an equitable collaboration framework, Ishimaru (2020) argues that they must identify and leverage the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, et. al., 1992) and cultural and intellectual resources that parents and families possess as foundational assets to improve student outcomes. Additionally, educational leaders must direct themselves from traditional and institutional unilateral, hierarchical, and top-down authoritative decision-making leadership and power structures, to embracing shared, distributed, and relational conceptions of leadership and power (Mayrowetz, 2008; Warren &

Mapp, 2011). Put differently, the equitable collaboration framework obliges educational leaders to understand that power can be cultivated between families, educators, school leaders, and community stakeholders to equitably increase access to valuable resources and opportunities and transform educational policies and systems to improve outcomes (Ishimaru, 2017).

Embracing an equitable collaboration framework is easier said than done. Equitable collaboration requires disruptive traditional, school-centered, and deficit-oriented perspectives engrained in school systems. Thus, I recognize that equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2020) can help discern the moments where tensions are more likely to unfold within family-school partnerships. As such, I draw on Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration framework to discern the moments and spaces where tensions were more likely to emerge—the moments and spaces where the YELI family-school partnership's goals, strategies, and roles were developed, decided, and affirmed. It is within these moments and spaces where transformative ruptures can unfold and disrupt asymmetrical power relations within the YELI family-school partnership (Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017). Transformative ruptures (Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017) are described as those “incidents, interactions, experiences, and moment where a disruption of pervasive coloniality, institutional racism, and systemic inequity occurs” (p. 29). Here, I am interested in examining tensions as transformative ruptures that create moments and spaces in which opportunities for change and possibility can emerge. Transformative ruptures can be seen as ‘choques’ or collisions between mindsets, discourses, ideologies, and politics... (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017). Thus, I draw on Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration framework to discern where transformative ruptures were more likely to emerge during the study and elucidate how response strategies undermined or fostered more equitable

approaches for collaboration within the YELI family-school partnership (Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017).

### **Applied Tensional Analysis**

Building on the equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2020), I draw on Mease's (2019) Applied Tensional Analysis (ATA) framework to inform the analytical strategy that discerned how tensions emerged and to analyze the enacted response strategies used to address tensions within the YELI family-school partnership. Mease (2019) describes ATA as a methodological framework that is particularly useful to analyze how tensions emerge and how the enacted responses to address those tensions can incessantly impact and change organizations. Mease's (2019) ATA framework suggests that tensions emerge in the moments and spaces where organizational practices are inconsistent, volatile, and thus open to change (Cooper, 2021). Here, Mease's (2019) definition of tension closely resembles Bernal and Aleman Jr.'s (2017) definition of transformational ruptures, signifying that tensions and transformational ruptures emerge as moments and opportunities for change and new possibilities. Yet, it's also important to acknowledge that Mease's (2019) framework does not address the historicity and context of oppression and dominant power dynamics within schools and communities. Thus, I pull from Bernal and Aleman Jr.'s (2017) framework of transformational ruptures to attend to the asymmetrical power dynamics and how they inform and shape the tensions and response strategies that can transform family-school partnerships.

I adopt ATA as a guiding framework to analyze the complexities of tensions and how the enacted responses and strategies to address tensions may impact and transform the YELI family-school partnership. Mease's (2019) ATA framework focuses on analyzing tensions to better understand how organizations operate in a state of constantly becoming; the idea is that

organizations are constantly emerging and changing through everyday interactions. In contrast to the belief that organizations are stable entities, ATA (Mease, 2019) is grounded in the assumption that organizational entities come to exist through human interaction and their relationships to other entities. Thus, to understand organizations as constantly becoming, ATA requires scholars to focus and analyze organizations as human interactions and the relational configurations that constitute those moments of human interaction (Mease, 2019). ATA also embraces the need for scholars to point practitioners toward key considerations as these particular stakeholders choose their own strategies and tactics to respond to tension in family-school partnerships. I argue that the YELI family-school partnership is constantly emerging, changing, and becoming through participant interaction and relational configurations that comprise and influence participant interactions. Therefore, ATA is a particularly appropriate framework to examine tensions, the response strategies that address those tensions, and key considerations and strategies for action and practice for all stakeholders.

Applying an ATA framework begins by identifying and analyzing tensions as the moments and spaces in which decisions and choices are made, such as when goals, strategies, and roles are developed, negotiated, enacted, and affirmed within the YELI family-school partnership (Ishimaru, 2020; Mease, 2019). Tensions are defined as general conflict that results in “stress, anxiety, discomfort, or tightness in making choices, responding to, and moving forward...” as experienced by family-school partnerships (Putnam et al., 2016, pg. 69). The ATA framework casts tension as an inevitable and beneficial aspect of collaboration. Tensions set off essential processes for shared sense-making, knowledge creation, new possibilities, new circumstances, and may serve as the driving force for change (Mease, 2019). Moreover, Mease’s (2019) ATA framework considers tensions as critical opportunities and moments when participants must

choose a response to address the tension, while also positioning me, as the scholar, in the assisting role of through contributing possible response strategies that practitioners may use to address the tensions (Mease, 2019). In other words, the ATA framework positions me as a participant researcher with the responsibility of offering the YELI family-school partnership actors a repertoire of response strategies. Next, I describe the ATA framework in more detail.

### *Analytical Loop*

The ATA framework focuses on tensions, context, enacted strategies, and a repertoire of potential responses (Mease, 2019). These four foci are situated within two loops: the analytical loop and the change loop. The analytical loop involves developing a contextually informed understanding of the tensions and the enacted responses to address those tensions. Tensions are identified as either praxis or conceptual tensions. Praxis tensions are those explicitly identified, acknowledged, and experienced by actors within the YELI family-school partnership. Conceptual tensions are not immediately acknowledged by participants, instead these tensions surface through data analysis and may occur within, between, or across data sources, such as interviews, surveys, and observation notes (Mease, 2019).

The second foci in the analytical loop requires that three dimensions of context be taken into consideration when analyzing tensions: organizational, social, and historical (Mease, 2019). First, the organizational context focuses on analyzing the unique configuration and relations within the YELI family-school partnership. For example, in this study, the organizational context specifically focused on the collaborative structure, practices, and relations amongst school district leaders, the partnership's backbone agency, its founder, community-based organizations, and parent leaders. Second, an analysis of the tension's social context involves examining how racism, redlining, disinvestment, and anti-immigrant economics and policies may have shaped

the identified tensions (Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017; Ishimaru, 2020; Mease, 2019). For example, the COVID-19 health pandemic, local school board politics, anti-immigration rhetoric, and economic downturns and financial upswings may not only evoke tensions but also enable or constrain the strategies used to navigate tensions (Mease, 2019). Lastly, the analysis of historical context refers to tracing the history of tensions to better understand how they emerged (Mease, 2019). In sum, the ATA of organizational, social, and historical context is designed to offer a nuanced understanding of how tensions emerge and the possible forces that enable or constrain how actors respond to navigate tensions (Mease, 2019).

The third foci within the analytical loop focuses on analyzing the response strategies participants used to address the tensions experienced within the YELI family-school partnership (Mease, 2019). Here, I shifted my attention to the specific and concrete ‘micro-practices’ (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004) and moments (Marsick et al., 2017; Stacy, 2001) that participants enacted on a regular basis. Mease (2019) explains how some response strategies can be identified through direct questioning, while others require a deeper observation and analysis to discern. To analyze the response strategies, I draw on Solorzano and Bernal’s (2001) transformational resistance framework to assess the possibilities and limitations of specific response strategies. I describe Solorzano and Bernal’s (2001) transformational resistance framework in more detail later in this chapter. The fourth and final element within the analytical loop involved cross-examining the response strategies in relation to context, with special attention given to how context enabled or constrained the enacted responses used to navigate the tensions within the YELI family-school partnership (Mease, 2019).

### *Change Loop*

While the analytical loop focuses on developing a nuanced understanding of tensions, context, and response strategies, Mease (2019) argues that it does not offer guidance for practitioners, nor an analysis of the implications and possibilities of the enacted responses. Therefore, Mease (2019) presents the ‘change loop’ within ATA as a critical shift that requires one to reconsider the relationship between context and enacted response strategies. In the change loop, the analysis focuses on how response strategies impact the YELI family-school partnership and the broader context. In other words, the use of the change loop required an examination of how response strategies re-constitute and re-configure the YELI family-school partnership in both intended and unintended ways (Mease, 2019). Additionally, given the unique structures and complex tensions that characterize family-school relations, the change loop offers guidance for developing what Mease (2019) refers to as “repertoires of response strategies.” A repertoire of response strategies offers practitioners a menu of choices for responding to tensions as well as helping them understand the potential implications of each of those responses (Mease, 2019). As part of compiling a repertoire of response strategies, Mease (2019) suggests that researchers should offer an analysis of the possibilities and risks of each response strategy. Thus, instead of offering a traditional set of best practices, Mease (2019) argues that a repertoire of response strategies would center practitioners as the most cognizant to determine the most efficacious responses based on their contexts.

### **Transformational Resistance as Lens to Analyze Response Strategies**

Finally, I draw on Solórzano and Bernal’s (2001) transformational resistance theoretical framework to analyze response strategies within the YELI family-school partnership. Transformational resistance is defined as one’s political consciousness, agency, and motivation to change the conditions producing social inequities (Hannegan-Martinez, et. al., 2022; Raygoza,

2016; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Using Critical Race Theory and Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), Solorzano and Bernal (2001) introduce transformational resistance as a race- and gender-conscious theoretical framework to examine and discern whether oppositional behavior entails both a critique of structural oppression and a motivation to change the conditions causing harm. The transformational resistance framework materialized from Solorzano and Bernal's (2001) critique of traditionally narrow conceptualizations of resistance, which failed to illustrate the extensive and transformative impact of the Chicano and Chicana student movements of the 1960s. Traditionally, resistance has been conceptualized as an act, thought, or characteristic of oppositional behavior, protest, and as a challenge to the status quo and structures of authority (Giroux, 1983). For example, the Center for Resistance Studies at the University of Sussex (2021) describes resistance as a conceptual lens to understand relationships between marginalized communities and oppressive systems of power. Resistance theories have conventionally challenged social and cultural reproduction theories by emphasizing that low-income Latinx families are not simply submissive, compliant, and acted on by authoritative education systems (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Resistance theories highlight the role of human agency and help demonstrate how individuals negotiate, struggle, and make sense of their interactions with dominant structures (Giroux, 1983; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Yet, as Solorzano and Bernal (2001) argue, traditional conceptualizations of resistance are limited and tend to focus on delineating individual roles in the process of social reproduction, and emphasize how participation in oppositional behaviors reinforce social inequities.

Solorzano and Bernal (2001) further argue that resistance is transformative when individuals engage in acts of resistance that embody both a critique of structural oppression and a desire for social justice. The transformational resistance framework contextualizes oppositional

behavior along two intersecting dimensions consisting of one's critique of structural oppression and one's desire to work to advance social justice (Hannegan-Martinez, et. al., 2022; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Specifically, the transformational resistance framework is conceptualized through four quadrants of oppositional behaviors: a.) reactionary behavior, b.) self-defeating resistance, c.) conformist resistance, and d.) transformative resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

The first quadrant consists of oppositional behavior referred to as 'reactionary behavior,' and is not considered a form of resistance because individuals who engage in this type of behavior lack both a criticism of structural oppression and are not motivated by social justice (Solórzano and Bernal, 2001). An example of reactionary behavior may consist of a student who misbehaves and has no critique of the social conditions that may inform why they behaved in that way.

The second quadrant refers to self-defeating resistance. Here, oppositional behavior is categorized as self-defeating resistance because the individuals involved may have some critique of structural oppression, but their behavior is not motivated by an interest in or desire for social justice (Solórzano and Bernal, 2001). Self-defeating resistance, in one instance, is exemplified by high school students who drop out of school due to a persuasive critique of schooling, but their decision to dropout is considered self-defeating because the behavior or act does not help transform the conditions that led them to execute it—or drop out—in the first place.

The third quadrant refers to conformist resistance, which is described as oppositional behavior motivated by social justice while lacking any critique of the dominant and oppressive structures contributing to social inequities (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Individuals who engage in conformist resistance may seek to improve student outcomes by organizing fundraisers to

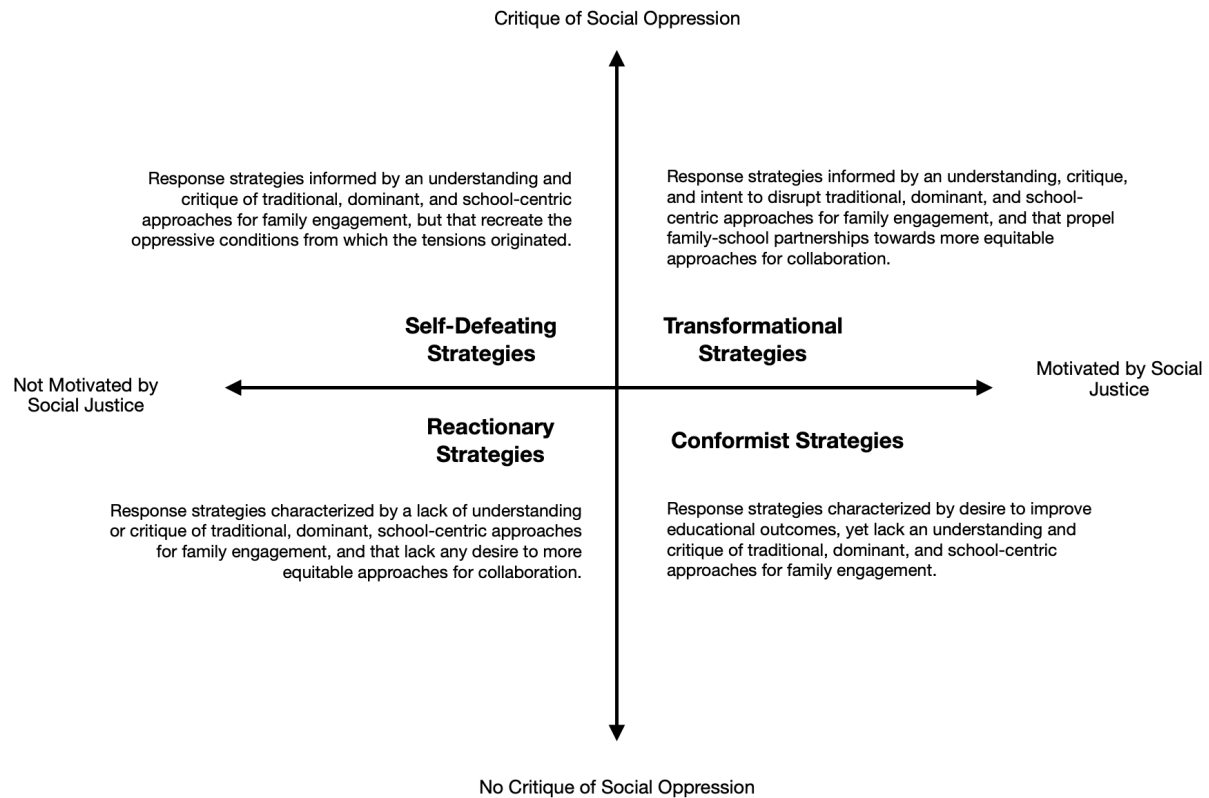
increase access to tutoring, counseling, field trips, and extra-curricular programming, without questioning or challenging the educational policies, systems, or socio-economic conditions that contribute to low academic attainment in working-class marginalized Latinx immigrant communities. Although conformist resistance can improve student outcomes, these activities and behaviors usually focus on helping students and families adapt and assimilate to the status quo and traditional schooling norms and practices.

Finally, in the fourth quadrant Solórzano and Bernal (2001) present transformative resistance as oppositional behavior that reflects both a critique of structural oppression and a staunch desire for social justice. Transformational resistance reflects Freire's (1970) conceptualization of critical consciousness, whereby individuals are both critically aware of systems of oppression and motivated to act for social change. Moreover, Solórzano and Bernal (2001) distinguish between internal and external forms of transformational resistance. Individuals who engage with internal behaviors of transformational resistance demonstrate behaviors that are subtle, and, on the surface, may appear to conform to dominant institutional, social, or cultural norms and expectations (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). For example, these individuals maintain both a critical awareness of and motivation for social justice, but instead of engaging in more overt types of behaviors, they may engage in the social justice struggle by pursuing graduate education and giving back to their community through becoming an educator, social worker, policy analyst, physician, attorney, researcher, etc. In contrast, individuals who engage in external transformational resistance denote more noticeable, visible, and overt types of behavior, and their behavior does not typically conform to institutional, social, and cultural mainstream status quo norms and expectations (Solórzano and Bernal, 2001).

In this study, I reproduce and adopt the transformational resistance framework by translating the four quadrants of oppositional behavior to four quadrants of response strategies to analyze which and how the enacted response strategies undermined or fostered more equitable approaches for collaboration in the YELI family-school partnership (Ishimaru, 2020; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). In this adapted framework, response strategies that fostered more equitable approaches for collaboration are labeled as transformational response strategies.

Transformational response strategies are propelled by an interest and desire to foster more equitable collaboration and focus on centering parents, families, and communities as leaders, experts, and decision-makers. Conformist strategies are those response strategies propelled by a desire to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration, but that conform to the conventional, dominant, and school-centric norms and approaches for collaboration. Self-defeating response strategies are strategies informed by an understanding and critique of dominant systems of oppression, but not propelled by an interest or desire to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. Lastly, reactionary response strategies are those strategies that do not challenge or address conventional, dominant, and school-centric norms, and that exhibit a lack of desire or motivation to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. Figure #1 illustrates how I adopt the transformational resistance framework to analyze response strategies in this case study. Using this conceptual framework, I illuminate the transformative nuances of five response strategies and develop of a repertoire of response strategies, which are described in more detail in the Chapter Seven (Mease, 2019).

**Figure #1. Quadrant of Response Strategies (adapted from Solorzano and Bernal, 2001)**



## Chapter 3

### Research Design

This study uses a qualitative single-case study design to examine the complexities of tension and how, if at all, the response strategies to address tensions helped foster more equitable approaches for collaboration within the YELI family-school partnership (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). A qualitative single-case methodology was ideal to attend to the behaviors and interactions that led to the emergence of tensions and how the tensions were addressed, if at all, by parent leaders, the YELI's founder, the backbone organization, organizational partners, and the school district (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). By focusing on one family-school partnership, I did not aim to make generalizable claims about how strategies that address tensions can foster equitable collaboration across all family-school partnerships. Instead, this dissertation seeks to contribute to equitable collaboration theory and practice by providing a detailed and descriptive narrative and analysis of the complexities of tensions and response strategies within family-school partnerships.

#### **Study Context: Yorbas Early Learning Initiative (YELI)**

This case study examined a unique family-school partnership described as a network of parents, caregivers, and residents working closely with nonprofit organizations, elementary schools, universities, and city and county agencies to create home, school, and neighborhood environments that promote the well-being of children aged 0 to 9 years old and their families in Yorbas, California. All identifying information about the partnership involves pseudonyms. The YELI family-school partnership is situated within the City of Yorbas (pseudonym) in Southern California, which has a population of more than 300,000, with 75 percent identified as Latinx. The Yorbas Unified School District (YUSD) is the local school district serving most of the

community, and as of the 2021-22 school year, served nearly 35,000 students. More than 90 percent of the students identified as Latinx, and over 75 percent of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch, a measure used by policymakers and researchers to assess student and family poverty within schools' student bodies.

The YELI family-school partnership seeks to improve early learning outcomes through two strategies. First, by helping families with young children access a broad and rich array of health, human, and economic supports, mainly through school-based Wellness Centers and other collaborative arrangements. Second, by building the capacity of parents and caregivers to lead the YELI family-school partnership's strategies, projects, and advocacy efforts. Modeled after Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011), the YELI family-school partnership is managed by a backbone organization consisting of the director, a program coordinator, and an administrative coordinator. The backbone organization rents office space inside the Esqueda Center, a local community-based non-profit organization in the City of Yorbas. Although the backbone organization is housed within the Esqueda Center, it is fiscally sponsored by a separate nonprofit organization, Compassionate Enterprises, which provides fiscal sponsorship and incubation services. As was the case during and prior to the study, the backbone organization was responsible for managing the partnership and its strategies through the coordination and facilitation of the YELI steering committee, general assembly, advisory committee, and ad hoc groups.

#### *Steering Committee*

The YELI steering committee, which met monthly, was comprised of parents and organizational partners, including the school district, and was designed to provide support, direction, and oversight of the initiative's strategies and the general assembly. To join in the

steering committee, parents are required to successfully participate and complete the parent leadership training series. The YELI steering committee was structured to ensure one parent representative from each of the school district's 20 elementary schools is a member. Membership requirements for organizations and agencies demanded active participation in the general assembly meetings.

#### *Ad Hoc Work Groups*

Composed of members from the steering committee, the YELI family-school partnership included three ad-hoc groups, which helped guide and implement different projects and reported to the steering committee. Three ad-hoc groups were active during the data collection timeline of the study; they focused on designing and implementing a Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) training model, an All Children Thrive project, and the parent leadership training program.

#### *General Assembly*

General assemblies were public meetings composed of hundreds of parents, community stakeholders, and representatives from organizational partners and the school district. Quarterly general assembly meetings served as the space where key decisions were made that impact the direction of the initiative, including the approval of proposals or changes to the partnership's goals, strategies, and work plan. Parents, community members, and organizational partners who attended at least two or more general assembly meetings could vote on decision-making proposals.

#### *Advisory Committee*

The advisory committee was developed to provide ongoing support and advice to the backbone organization to ensure the success of the YELI family-school partnership. The

advisory committee was comprised of the initiative's founder, school district leadership, the executive director from a key nonprofit organization named Familias Fuertes (Strong Families), and the program officer from the local foundation that financially supported the YELI family-school partnership, as it did throughout the study's duration.

### **Purposeful Sampling**

My understanding and experience with designing and facilitating community-based cross-sector partnerships in low-income Latinx communities, along with my longstanding personal and professional relationship with the founder of YELI and with the community of Yorbas, led to the purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) of the YELI family-school partnership as a case study for my dissertation. My relationship with Armando, the founder of YELI family-school partnership, began in 2006 when I was an undergraduate student in the College of Chicano Studies, where Armando served as an assistant professor, and I had an opportunity to support a community-based participatory action research project in the City of Yorbas.

As a graduate student, I continued working with Armando as a consultant supporting the planning, design, and facilitation of numerous community-based cross-sector collaborations, which included Promesa Boyle Heights, the California Endowment Building Healthy Communities Initiative, First 5 Los Angeles Best Start Initiative, and several philanthropy-funded civic and community leadership capacity building initiatives focused on educational equity across Los Angeles County and Orange County.

By 2014, Armando decided to mount a campaign to run for the school board of the Yorbas Unified School District, where his three children were enrolled and in the city he had lived in since the early 1990s. Based on experiences and challenges in designing and implementing community-driven early education initiatives, Armando decided to run for office

on an early education platform. Through many years of professional experience beyond academia, and with the increased local, state, and federal budgetary investments in early education, Armando and I both strengthened our understanding and prioritization of early childhood education. Yet, Armando was convinced that community-based early childhood collaborative investments fell short for three key reasons (among others). First, they neglected the school district. Second, participating organizations and institutions lacked capacity to engage and empower parents and families. And lastly, most efforts launched with or by philanthropy made big splashes by dangling large amounts of money and generating unrealistic expectations and promises to entice and convene organizations and agencies that often created environments where organizations showed up competing for resources and not necessarily collaborating with each other. Informed by these insights and experiences, Armando launched a successful campaign for school board, while also initiating the formation of the YELI family-school partnership. At this time, I had formally stopped working with Armando to begin my doctoral program at the University of Washington in Seattle.

While in Seattle, I remained connected with Armando and learned how the YELI family-school partnership was emerging. I also had the opportunity to attend several convenings starting in 2017 and, by Fall 2018, I noticed something special was taking place, as more than 250 parents, school district principals and family engagement liaisons, community-based organizations, universities, and city and county leaders were regularly participating in large convenings focused on collaborating to improve early learning outcomes. From my interactions with Armando and observations of the YELI convenings, it appeared that Armando had fostered a community-based partnership that involved the school district as a key partner, which was an observed limitation of previous early childhood education initiatives we had been engaged with.

In contrast with other early childhood initiatives focused on children birth through five years old, the YELI family-school partnerships centered on improving early learning outcomes for children 0 to 9 years old. The inclusion of school-aged children appeared as a successful strategic decision to bring in the school district into the YELI family-school partnership. The inclusion of the Yorbas Unified School District in the YELI family-school partnership was not only a novel endeavor, but it was also unique in the sense that the school district was brought in as a partner, rather than the owner, of the partnership. I learned that the initiative was structured to be led by Latinx working-class parent leaders and managed by community-based organization. Yet, despite the school district not formally owning or leading the family-school partnership, the inclusion of the district in a community-driven partnership was a primary driver for my selection of the YELI family-school partnership as a case study for the dissertation (Patton, 2002). Particularly, I sought a research space where I could examine the complexities of tension and how strategies to address tension may or may not help foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. The YELI family-school partnership offered a unique opportunity to engage in a space ripe for tension to emerge, and to build and expand our understanding of equitable collaboration (Merriam, 2009).

### **Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis centered on the incidents, interactions, and experiences between parent leaders, the initiative's founder, backbone agency, organizational representative, and school district leaders, with a central focus on how all of these stakeholders perceived and interpreted tensions and the enacted response strategies to address those tensions. Using the concepts of equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020), applied tensional analysis (Mease, 2019), and transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), I analyzed how participants

described, interpreted, and made sense of key tensions and the response strategies to address those tensions, focusing my attention on the interactions, moments, and situations that created transformative ruptures (Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017) within the YELI family-school partnership.

### **Data Collection Timeline**

While I have known of the YELI family-school partnership since its inception in 2016, formal data collection took place from July 2022 through May 2023. I began the formal data collection process during a renewal phase in the family-school partnership featuring several factors: a new project director was coming onboard, growing interests among partners and parents to return to in-person convenings after the COVID-19 pandemic had shifted nearly all engagement to a virtual platform, a growing influx of new parents interested in participating, and existing parent leaders were reviewing, refining, and updating the partnership's vision, mission, and values. Leadership transitions within the backbone organization had temporarily paused the partnership's ongoing steering committee and general assembly meetings. By the time I started formally collecting data, I learned that the backbone organization was finalizing the planning and logistics to re-initiate the steering committee, general assembly, and parent leadership training series. Next, I describe the study's participants, data collection and analysis, limitations, and my positionality.

### **Participants**

Parent leaders, the founder, backbone agency staff, school district leaders, nonprofit organizational leaders, and the funder of the YELI family-school partnership comprised the case study's participants. A table outlining all research participants is available in the appendix. All participants were actively involved and participated in the steering committee, general assembly, ad hoc groups, or advisory committee. A small group of school district leaders (Silvia, Brenda,

Katie, and Baudelia) were included in the list of participants due to an impromptu meeting organized by the funder toward the end of the data collection period. I added these participants to the case study due to the significance of the meeting where the topic and tension around community-schools was discussed, which I narrate in more detail in my findings chapters.

Focal participants were interviewed and selected using a combination of recommendations from the founder, as well as snow sampling techniques (Yin, 2018). Focal participants played important leadership roles in the planning, design, coordination, and implementation of the steering committee, general assembly, parent leadership training, ad hoc groups, and advisory committee. Focal participants were interviewed several times and are highlighted by an asterisk next to their names. The table in the appendix summarizes the list of participants, their titles, and affiliation at the time of my study. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Next, I provide brief introductions of the focal participants to contextualize them in this study.

### ***Isabela***

Isabela, a parent leader, was born and raised in Colombia and immigrated to the United States in 2019, and at the time of this study, lived in the City of Yorbas with her husband and two children. Her oldest son was 9 years old and the youngest was 6 years old. Isabela graduated from law school in Colombia in 2006 and worked as an attorney prior to immigrating to the U.S. due to the challenging and limited economic opportunities in Colombia. Isabela began participating with the YELI family-school partnership in 2019. She was motivated by the possibility of generating change in the schools and community, and strongly believed that low-income Latinx Spanish-speaking parents have the necessary tools and ability to improve school outcomes. Isabella believed that schools and communities are not stable but are rather

evolutionary systems that require evolutionary strategies and solutions to meet the needs of new generations of students.

### ***Flor***

Flor, a parent leader, was born and raised in Puebla, Mexico and lived in the City of Tijuana prior to immigrating to the City of Yorbas, where she had lived since 2008. Flor comes from a family historically involved with Mexican politics and, during her interviews, mentioned that she was being groomed to continue her family's legacy and involvement in politics. However, Flor developed a disdain toward politics early in life. When she was six years old, Flor overheard a family member describe politics as "...la politica es asi, es saber comer mierda sin hacer gestos" which translates in English to, "...politics is like that, its knowing how to eat shit without making any gestures." After hearing this, Flor mentioned choosing a different path and attended university, graduating with a degree in industrial engineering. While simultaneously studying and working, she unexpectedly received critical support and mentorship from her supervisors, who helped pay her tuition and books to ensure she would succeed. When Flor asked her supervisors why they supported her, they said it was because she was in need and that she should pay it forward and always help someone in need. These words and experiences influenced Flor's decision to get involved in school and community-based projects and opportunities, especially those focused on addressing the needs of families with young children. Flor began participating with the YELI family-school partnership in 2019. After taking leadership classes through YELI, she shared how she learned about the importance of and need to understand educational policies, especially how policies and systems impact student experiences and outcomes. Flor believed the educational system was not designed to support low-income immigrant Spanish-speaking families.

***Emma***

Emma, another parent leader, was born and raised in Veracruz in the eastern part of Mexico before immigrating to the United States in 2016 with her daughters and husband. Emma lived in the City of Yorbas with her two daughters who were enrolled in the Yorbas Unified School District (YUSD). During her interviews, she recognized that her value for education was ingrained by her mother, who worked hard to provide Emma and her sisters the opportunity to go to university. Emma was one final semester from graduating; she described having a profound value for education and wants to ensure her daughters can succeed educationally. Emma's engagement with the YELI family-school partnership started in 2019. After Emma enrolled her daughters in the YUSD, she noticed a major contrast to her family's experience with the previous school district, where the principals and teachers did not speak Spanish nor made any effort to engage with Spanish-speaking parents. In contrast, at YUSD, the school principal made a concerted effort to engage with her, spoke Spanish, and, as Emma described it, made her feel like she was in Mexico again. This experience convinced Emma that school principals have a major role in supporting student success and empowering parents.

***Rosalba***

Rosalba, a parent leader, immigrated from Puebla, Mexico nearly 23 years ago and had resided in the City of Yorbas for approximately 18 years, where she lived with her husband and four daughters. Three of her daughters were enrolled at Yorbas Unified School District, while her oldest daughter is attended Yorbas College. Rosalba began participating in the YELI family-school partnership in 2016. Rosalba described herself as a mother who likes to get involved and participate in workshops, programs and events that can help her learn how to support her family and community. In her interviews, Rosalba shared how YELI helped her understand the

importance of early childhood education and how to support her children succeeding academically and emotionally; she stated that she was motivated to contribute helping other parents learn how to support their students succeed.

### ***Gloria***

Gloria served as the director of the YELI family-school partnership. She was a first-generation Latina college graduate and daughter of two immigrants from Guatemala. Gloria had recently graduated with a doctoral degree in June 2022 prior to starting her role as the director of YELI. Gloria described the YELI family-school partnership as a platform where parents, community members can really engage with their own community, but also make their voices, their opinions, and their experiences heard by different stakeholders.

### ***Sofia***

Sofia was the project coordinator for the YELI family-school partnership. Sofia became involved with the YELI family-school partnership in 2018 as a parent after the principal of the school where her son was then enrolled invited her to attend a YELI family-school partnership meeting. At that first meeting, Sofia shared how she was profoundly moved after participating in an activity where she learned about the alarming low percentage of Latinx students in Yorbas who entered kindergarten ready to succeed. Sofia described the YELI family-school partnership as an initiative, a village, that focuses on bridging the gaps and bringing forth resources that need to be in and accessible to the community so that kids succeed.

### ***Esmeralda***

Esmeralda was the administrative coordinator for YELI family-school partnership. Throughout the last five years, Esmeralda had worn different hats and played different roles within the YELI family-school partnership. For example, Esmeralda had been a parent with a

child enrolled in the school district, had served as a ‘promotora’ or ‘community health worker’ for the YELI family-school partnership, and had worked as the community engagement coordinator at the Esqueda Center—a key organizational partner that helped families access economic resources and services, and which organizes large-scale community events where families could access free resources such as backpacks, food, health care, etc. I have also known Esmeralda since 2008, as we were both undergraduate students in Chicano Studies at the same university. Esmeralda describes the YELI family-school partnership as a collaborative between parents, service providers, and schools coming together to improve early education outcomes for children.

### ***Ingrid***

Ingrid served as the director of family engagement at the Yorbas Unified School District. She had served the Yorbas community for more than 30 years, not just as an educator but also as an active community member. Prior to her role as the director of family engagement, Ingrid served as an elementary school principal for over 20 years, during which she received numerous recognitions for her leadership, including the Kiwanis Golden Rule Award and as well as the State of California District Woman of the Year Award. Ingrid holds a bachelor’s degree in liberal studies and a master’s in education administration. During her interviews, Ingrid described the YELI family-school partnership as an initiative designed to empower parents to bring about change in early childhood education, to ensure that children start on a more level playing field.

### ***Renata***

Renata was the director of elementary education at the Yorbas Unified School District. Renata moved to the City of Yorbas when she was just four years old, and was a proud parent, resident, and alumni of the Yorbas Unified School District, where she attended elementary,

middle, and high school. After graduating from the University of Arizona with a bachelor's in elementary education and teaching, Renata returned to the Yorbas Unified School District to teach for nearly nine years, served as a school principal for 13 years, and at the time of this study, was in her third year as the district's director of elementary education. Her children were enrolled in the same elementary school she attended as a child. Renata described the purpose of the YELI family-school partnership as helping to raise awareness of the resources in the community and to empower parents.

### ***Maria Cruz***

Maria Cruz was the executive director of Familias Fuertes (Strong Families), a grassroots nonprofit community organization that serves low-income families in the City of Yorbas. Maria Cruz was also a licensed clinical psychologist and adjunct professor. In her interviews, she described how her mother, a social worker—along with her mother's neighbor—co-founded the organization, Familias Fuertes, from the need to find and provide support to Latina women dealing with domestic violence issues in the City of Yorbas. Maria Cruz explained how her mom co-built a 501(c)3 organization that was operated out of their garage for many years. At the time of the study, Familias Fuertes was a key organizational partner within the YELI family-school partnership. Maria Cruz described the YELI family-school partnership as a mechanism that helps align and move programs, resources, and services in the same direction to improve outcomes for children and their families.

### ***Sarah***

Sarah was a program officer for a local First 5 agency, which provided funding support for the YELI family-school partnership since 2016. Sarah had more than 20 years of experience in early childhood education and had served as a classroom teacher for preschool to 5<sup>th</sup> grade,

and as a program director for various programs including Head Start, State Preschool, and dual immersion. She has also conducted her early childhood education work and as a consultant. As a program officer, Sarah helps ensure that First 5 provides the resources and technical assistance needed for the YELI family-school partnership to succeed. Sarah described the YELI family-school partnership as a data-driven and parent-led initiative focused on improving early childhood outcomes.

### *Armando*

Armando was a community leader, founder of the YELI family-school partnership, an associate professor at California State University, a successful consultant, and had been a governing board member for the Yorbas Unified School Board since 2016. I met Armando in 2006 when I was an undergraduate student and took several of his upper division university classes. I also worked with Armando's consulting firm from 2009 through 2014 where I was afforded the opportunity to plan, design, and facilitate community partnership efforts to support social movement organizations, philanthropy, and public agencies dedicated to policy and systems change in low-income and marginalized communities. Since 2006, Armando and I developed and maintained a great friendship; I have had the privilege of getting to know him at a deeper level, and he has been a mentor throughout my academic and professional career. Thus, I am able to describe Armando in more depth compared to other participants.

Armando was born in Salinas, California, and is the youngest of 13 children and is from a family that immigrated from Mexico. In his youth, Armando shared that his family struggled economically and he would travel with his family extensively between the United States and Jalisco, Mexico, which led to Armando attending many different schools, and eventually graduating from high school in Chicago, Illinois. Armando described his upbringing as a story

exemplifying the resiliency of Mexican immigrant families and recalled various experiences that shaped his own passion and commitment for social justice and educational equity. In particular, he often references the story of when he left the United States and went back to Mexico after completing 6<sup>th</sup> grade in Salinas, California, and how the school principal in Jalisco wanted Armando to repeat 6<sup>th</sup> grade based on the belief that Mexican students were a year ahead of U.S. students. However, with the support of his older brother, Armando pushed back and advocated until he was offered the opportunity to take an exam at the ‘Secretaria de Educacion de Jalisco’ (Jalisco’s Department of Education) to prove he was ready for 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

At the time of this study, Armando was recognized as a practitioner of neighborhood-based approaches to community development. He had over twenty years of experience with community organizing, resident leadership development, organizational capacity building, multi-stakeholder community planning processes, building multi-agency service collaboratives, and local policy and systems change. Armando taught courses in Latina/o social policy and community development, Latina/o immigration, and leadership development in Latina/o communities. He held a master’s degree in urban and regional planning and a doctorate in urban geography. Armando’s scholarship examined the politics involved in the use of public-private partnerships (i.e., new modes of local governance) to foster multi-sectoral collaboration to design, implement, and evaluate social policies for disadvantaged populations.

During his interviews, Armando described the founding of YELI family-school partnership as a long-term, nonlinear, process that evolved over the course of his experience and insights in designing, facilitating, and implementing systems, policies, and programs to support families and improve early learning outcomes. Specifically, Armando recalled how his consulting role and experiences with the Promesa Boyle Heights Initiative and First 5 Los

Angeles Best Start (which I was also a part of) helped him understand the strengths and challenges involved in a place-based approach to improving early learning outcomes.

Particularly, through these experiences, Armando acknowledged and was deeply convinced that a place-based collective impact approach focused on improving early learning outcomes needs to involve the school system. Armando contended that he struggles when he is introduced as the founder of the YELI family-school partnership. He did not label himself as the founder, but rather, described his role as being part of the foundational moment, along with others, in shaping the decisions to commit to a place-based collective impact early childhood development strategy.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this dissertation's study consisted of a triangulation of data sources, including interviews, observations, and document analysis. I used multiple sources of evidence in this case study to develop converging evidence and strengthen construct validity and data reliability (Glensne, 2006; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). To increase the reliability of this case study, I also developed a database consisting of the collected raw data separated out from my own analysis of the raw data leading to findings and conclusions (Yin, 2018). This database included notes, insights, and reflections from each participant interview and observation, and my analysis of documents in addition to narrative compilations—including annotated bibliographies—cross-references, memos, and my own open-ended answers to the case study's research questions (Yin, 2018). The next section expands on the data sources used in this case study.

### **Observations**

Observations were a critical source of data collection to understand and discern the nature of tensions and how they unfolded and were or were not addressed in the context of the YELI

family-school partnership (Mease, 2019; Yin, 2018). My dissertation consisted of more than 74 hours of recorded observations across various meetings, including the steering committee, general assembly, advisory committee, and ad hoc meetings. My observations focused on participants' interactions, behaviors, language, and actions, as opposed to how participants may have described or conceived their behavior and actions through interviews and documents (Argyris and Schon, 1974). In other words, my observations attended to the interactions, relationships, and dynamics between individuals across the various meeting spaces.

To help discern where tensions were more likely to emerge within the YELI family-school partnership, I used Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration approach as the guiding framework. I understand tension to be likely to emerge within the context of the four dimensions of equitable collaboration, which include the spaces and moments when, where, and how goals, strategies, and roles are developed, negotiated, decided, enacted, and affirmed. I recognized that when I began data collection in the summer of 2022, the YELI family-school partnership was in a re-emerging phase, with new leadership at the school district and within the backbone agency, and a new influx of parent leaders. The partnership was in a special moment in time where key goals, strategies, and roles were being developed, negotiated, and decided upon across the partnership.

Detailed observation was recorded via field notes taken during all the partnership meetings I attended. I also asked for permission to audio record specific virtual and in-person meetings. Large in-person meetings, such as the general assembly and parent leadership trainings, were not recorded but I took detailed field notes during and after these meetings. All audio recordings and field notes were transcribed for analysis.

### *Steering Committee Meetings*

From August 2022 through March 2023, I observed and audio-recorded seven steering committee meetings, for a combined 14 hours in duration. The steering committee meetings were consistently used to emphasize and affirm the mission, purpose, and values of the YELI family-school partnership, while also serving as a space to update the committee on the various strands of work that were taking place, including information about upcoming workshops, grant opportunities, and projects or events.

#### *General Assembly Meetings*

I had the opportunity to observe two general assembly meetings. At the general assembly meeting held on September 16, 2022, which was the first in-person general assembly since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the session focused on providing partners and parents, especially those who were new, with an historical overview of the YELI family-school partnership, along with introducing and proposing upcoming projects—such as the re-launch of the parent leadership training series. The second general assembly I observed took place on December 16, 2022, and focused on building relationships and ensuring all participants understood the shared purpose, values, and guiding framework of the YELI family-school partnership. Key accomplishments were also highlighted, and several parent leaders offered testimonies of their experiences in the partnership over the years.

#### *Strategic Planning Meetings*

I observed three strategic planning meetings focused on developing a strategic three-year work plan for the YELI family-school partnership. This work plan was a task requested by the funder, First 5, to renew their contract with the partnership for three additional years. These planning meetings included the founder, school district leadership, the partnership's backbone

agency, representatives from key organizational partners, and two parent leaders who were actively engaged in the partnership.

#### *Parent Leadership Training Sessions & Debriefing Meetings*

I observed three parent leadership training sessions and two debriefing meetings that were held immediately after the training session. The purpose of the parent leadership training was to strengthen parents' and caregivers' leadership skills to ensure they can provide or access the optimal level of support for families with children ages 0 to 9 in helping their own children reach their full potential. Each parent leadership training session, which took place at the Esqueda Center, involved more than 200 parents, along with school principals and family engagement liaisons from about 20 participating elementary schools. I recall arriving at the Esqueda Center on those Friday mornings and being impressed to see three to four large yellow school buses parked outside the center, knowing they were used to ensure transportation was not a barrier for parent leaders to participate in the leadership sessions. After each training session, the planning team—which primarily consisted of the backbone agency, school district leaders, and the founder—held space to debrief and reflect on the training. These debriefing meetings were critical opportunities to observe the possibility for tension to emerge, as these spaces focused on identifying what was working well and what was needed to improve to achieve the goals of the trainings and the partnership.

#### *Needs Assessment Planning Meetings*

The needs assessment planning meetings, which took place in-person at the Esqueda Center, consisted of the backbone agency and parent leaders who co-designed a process to develop and facilitate a parent-driven needs assessment for the YELI family-school partnership. In four needs assessment planning meetings, I took the role of participant-observer (Merriam,

2009), during which I engaged in conversation with parents and supported the design and implementation of the needs assessment project. Specifically, I developed a facilitation guide for parent leaders who were going to facilitate the conversations in small groups during the session. Due to my role as a participant-observer during the needs assessment planning meetings, I was not able to take detailed field notes as I did for other observations. Thus, after each needs assessment planning meeting, I dedicated time to writing my thoughts and reflections in a separate room within the Esqueda Center or in my car. I also recorded voice memos on my phone while traveling home from the Esqueda Center to capture additional reflections.

### *Alignment Meeting*

Toward the end of my data collection timeline in May 2023, I was invited to observe an ‘alignment meeting’ which I describe in more detail in the findings chapters. This meeting was organized by the funder to specifically address an emerging tension between the school district and the backbone organization managing the YELI family-school partnership. The ‘alignment meeting’ included the founder, the school district’s executive cabinet, the backbone organization, a professor and researcher from UC Yorbas, and a program officer from the funder, First 5. The partnership founder, Armando, invited me to observe the ‘alignment meeting’ where I attended to the interactions and dynamics between individuals as they engaged in conversation to address an emerging tension between the school district and the backbone agency concerning a community-schools grant that was awarded to the school district. My description and analysis of this tension and the response strategy I observed is detailed in the finding chapters.

Below is a table summarizing the different meetings and hours of observations.

**Table 1.*****Summary of Different Meetings and Hours of Observations***

<b>Observations</b>	<b>Total Hours</b>
Steering Committee Meetings	14
YELI Planning Committee Meetings	15
General Assembly Meetings	5
Funder Strategic Planning Working Meeting	7
Alignment Meeting	2
Parent Leadership Capacity Building Training Sessions	10
Vision, Mission, and Values Ad Hoc Team	2
Community-Schools Forum	2
Needs Assessment Planning Team Meetings	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>74 Hours</b>

*Interviews*

An important source of data for this case study consisted of interviews. I conducted 17 in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews (60 to 75 minutes each) with four Latina parent leaders, the founder, three staff representing the backbone organization, two school district leaders, the designated program office from the local First 5 agency, and the executive director of a key community-based organizational partner (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). These focal participants are highlighted by an asterisk in participant list in Appendix A. All interviews were conducted, recorded with permission, and transcribed in either English or

Spanish. I initially conducted interviews with the founder and the backbone agency to learn about the historical, political, and economic context of the YELI family-school partnership, and to identify the pertinent individuals influencing and shaping their collaborative spaces. I used a snowball sampling technique (Patton, 2002) to identify additional and relevant individuals to interview in this study. Snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) helped me identify key parent leaders, school district leaders, and organizational partners who were actively helping shape the YELI family-school partnership. The interviews helped gather participants' background information, and discern their understanding of the partnership's purpose and their roles, as well as their history and perceptions of the collaborative. Specifically, the interviews were critical to elicit the tensions that were impacting the YELI family-school partnership.

After transcribing the interviews, I shared a copy of the transcript with each participant to ask if I had accurately captured their responses, and to elicit additional input they may not have shared during the interview. In addition to the interviews, and as part of the observations, I engaged in numerous informal conversations with participants, specially before and after meetings, to gauge my interpretations and findings. These informal conversations were feasible due to the new and existing relationships I had formed with participants—relationships I hoped to continue beyond this dissertation's study.

### *Documentary Evidence*

The founder gave me access to an online folder that included pertinent historical data and documents, organized by year from 2015 through 2022, on the YELI family-school partnership. The folder included information such as drafts and final copies of grant applications, work plans, the Early Development Instrument database, landscape analysis reports, leadership development training agendas and PowerPoint slides, the partnership's theory of change, as well as

administrative resources, such as key contracts, financial information, and other administrative and logistical data. Reviewing these documents helped me understand the historical context of the YELI family-school partnership, including which organizations were initially involved and the different areas of work and priorities undertaken throughout the years. Over the course of the data collection process, the director of the YELI family-school partnership also shared key documents—such as meeting agendas, PowerPoint slides, facilitation guides, leadership training lesson plans, and strategy planning documents—that were generated in preparation for convenings with the funder to discuss the possibility of receiving an additional four years of funding. Specifically, I paid attention to documents that helped unearth how key tensions within the partnership emerged and were addressed. For example, documents that clearly outlined the purpose and objectives of a specific goal, project, or activity were instrumental to understanding why there may have been resistance to certain efforts. These files and documents were helpful in verifying and augmenting evidence from my interviews and observations, including making inferences that guided questions and potential lines of inquiry, especially around tensions (Yin, 2018). The files and documents informed and guided iterative lines of inquiry through semi-structured interviews and observations (Merriam, 2009, Patton, 1990, Yin, 2018). More importantly, these documents were vital to my data collection and triangulation process (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2018).

### **Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). Data analysis was informed by Mease's (2019) applied tensional analysis framework, and based on the case study's propositions, including the argument that tensions or transformational ruptures were more likely to emerge in the moments and spaces where decisions were made regarding

goals, strategies, and roles (Ishimaru, 2020; Mease, 2019). Throughout the data collection and analysis, I ‘wallowed’ or played with the data in search of emerging themes, patterns, and insights (Meriam, 2009, Yin, 2018). I assembled a case study database to organize and track transcriptions, reflective memos, emerging patterns, themes, and insights (Meriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). Using an open coding process, I familiarized myself with the data and identified emerging patterns and themes by carefully reviewing transcripts, observation field notes, and extensive reflective and analytic memos (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2018). I wrote reflective and analytic memos throughout the data collection and data analysis process, especially after conducting interviews, after observing meetings, and after reviewing interview transcripts and observation notes (Merriam, 2009). These analytic memos were vital to discern and analyze key tensions and response strategies across my findings chapters.

The first phase of data analysis consisted of developing a contextually informed understanding of key tensions, specifically those perceived as transformative ruptures, and the enacted response(s) to navigate the tensions within the YELI family-school partnership. I drew on Mease’s applied tensional analysis (Mease, 2019) to analyze the organizational, social, and historical contexts that may have shaped key tensions and enabled or constrained the response strategies used to navigate the tensions. Specifically, this contextual analysis of tensions included examining the history of how the YELI family-school partnership was founded, its collaborative structure, and how local school board politics have shaped key tensions.

The second phase of data analysis focused on analyzing the enacted response strategies used to address the tensions within the YELI family-school partnership. I draw on Solorzano and Bernal’s (2001) transformational resistance framework to analyze the possibilities and limitations of the enacted response strategies in order to foster more equitable approaches for

collaboration. Here, I paid attention to the specific and concrete practices and moments that participants enacted to navigate tensions. While some response strategies were identified through interviews with participants, other response strategies were discerned through my observations and analytic memos. Next, I cross-examined the response strategies in relation to their contexts, paying particular attention to how their respective contexts enabled or constrained the enacted responses used to address the tensions. I examined how response strategies may have re-constituted and re-configured the YELI family-school partnership in both intended and unintended ways (Mease, 2019).

The final phase of data analysis consisted of building a repertoire of response strategies (Mease, 2019). The repertoire of response strategies offers practitioners a menu of choices for responding to tensions and as well as helping them understand the potential implications of each of those responses (Mease, 2019). As part of compiling a repertoire of response strategies, Mease (2019) suggests that researchers should offer an analysis of the possibilities and risks of each response strategy. In practice, this repertoire of response strategies is designed to equip practitioners with multiple options for responding to tensions within collaborative spaces.

I used codes to identify and track “transformative ruptures” (Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017), including the interactions, moments, and ‘choques’ or collisions between mindsets, discourses, ideologies, and politics amongst participants within the YELI family-school partnership (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Bernal & Aleman Jr., 2017). Using Ishimaru’s (2020) equitable collaboration framework, I anticipated tensions as being more likely to emerge in those moments and spaces where goals, strategies, and roles were discussed—such as at debriefing sessions, planning committee meetings, and strategic planning meetings hosted by the funder. I tracked different types of tensions described by participants and those that emerged from analyzing the

different data sources. My approach included the practice of writing reflective memos throughout the data analysis process. After each interview, I engaged in informal conversations with all participants where I shared copies of their interview transcripts and initial interpretations and insights, and asked if they had additional input, questions, and feedback, which some participants offered and I would convene with them informally after scheduled YELI meetings.

### **Limitations**

As is the case of all research, there are several limitations in this case study. First, this case study did not seek to answer whether the YELI family-school partnership was effective or successful, nor to generalize across all family-school partnerships. Instead, this case study focused on understanding the complexity of tensions and how, if at all, tensions and responses to any tension can help us better understand how to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. In addition, since the family-school partnership was founded in 2015, I was not able to observe and interview participants during the formation of YELI's early phases. And more importantly, I knew I would be collecting data at a particular moment in time when many individuals were new to the partnership (such as the director of the backbone organization) and that other individuals who were involved with the partnership since 2016 had transitioned out. Thus, this study will rely on the perspectives of a limited number of individuals who know the partnership's history and were involved since the entity was formed or during its initial years. In addition, during several interviews I asked participants to think retrospectively and recall what they thought and experienced back in time in relation to tensions.

### **Positionality**

I acknowledge that my experience and background living in and working with marginalized parents, policy advocates, community-based advocacy organizations, school

districts, and local government agencies in various cross-sector partnerships informed and shaped my interest in better understanding how to strengthen collaborative approaches to improve educational outcomes in low-income high-need communities. I grew up and live in Southeast Los Angeles, which has historically been described as low-income, working-class, immigrant, overcrowded region of Los Angeles County, and has been labeled by mainstream and other types of media as a corrupt corridor due to its history of political corruption scandals. However, I view Southeast Los Angeles as my home and a community populated by hard-working, beautiful, resilient, loving, intelligent immigrant families who are deeply committed to the success of their children, students, neighbors, and broader community.

Moreover, I also had to navigate the juxtaposition of engaging as a light-skinned Chicano male university researcher in a space primarily represented by low-income, immigrant, and Spanish-speaking Latinx women of color. I attempted to attend to the potential challenges of building trust and relationships while creating safe and welcoming spaces to engage and learn. I recognize the historical patterns of harmful research in low-income Latinx communities and the need to be attentive, respectful, and transparent, while also protecting the confidentiality of participants and engaging in continuous reflective practices. For this reason, I regularly wrote reflective memos, especially immediately following interviews and observations, to identify and clarify my assumptions, biases, and dispositions, and to also acknowledge my history, culture, identities, knowledge, relationships, and experiences in shaping my analysis and interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009). I engaged in reflective practice by writing memos, re-reading key articles and books, and discussing findings with my dissertation chair, PhD program colleagues, friends, and mentors to help me reflect and think critically about how I was understanding, interpreting, and analyzing the data and findings.

As previously mentioned, I have a long-standing relationship with Armando, the founder of the YELI family-school partnership, and this relationship played an important role in not only shaping my interest in this study, but also my ability to access the setting and his pre-existing relationships with focal participants in the case study. For instance, since Armando was no longer actively involved in many of the YELI family-school partnership planning, steering committee, general assembly, and trainings meetings, I purposefully engaged in various collaborative spaces to ground and immerse myself in the voices, experiences, and reflections of the parent leaders, the backbone agency, and school district leaders without Armando's presence. Moreover, to navigate the power dynamics of analyzing Armando's leadership and role in the partnership, I made sure—through my interviews, observations, and reflective memos—to intentionally look for alternative and contrasting descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of the same tensions within the study. The intentional use of pseudonyms across this study was a key strategy to attend to the tension and risk of wanting to be loyal to any individual, especially Armando. Post-conferral, I intend to share my findings and repertoire of response strategies with the YELI family-school partnership in hopes that this research is helpful in advancing equitable collaboration. I also plan to stay involved and engaged in the YELI family-school partnership for years to come, especially due to its focus on improving early education outcomes, the relationships I built over time with participants, and my professional role in working to advance educational equity.

## **Chapter 4: Looming Tensions in the YELI Family-School Partnership**

In alignment with Mease's (2019) Applied Tensional Analysis methodological framework, this chapter starts with a contextual overview of the YELI family-school partnership. Here, I describe the origin of the YELI family-school partnership in 2015 and introduce and situate the five key tensions in this study across the eight-year timeline (2015-2023) of the partnership. Particularly, the intent of this chapter is to introduce the five tensions and briefly discuss how they emerged. The in-depth description and analysis of the tensions and how they were addressed are highlighted in chapters five and six.

### *City of Yorbas & the Yorbas Unified School District*

The City of Yorbas is a 24-square mile city located in Southern California with a population of more than 250,000. The Yorbas Unified School District (YUSD) was founded in the 1890s. YUSD is one of California's largest school districts with more than 30,000 students; it is the third largest employer in the City of Yorbas. Over 80 percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch, approximately 50 percent are English learners, almost 90 percent of the students are designated as coming from low-income families, and nearly 98 percent of students identify as Latinx. The Yorbas Unified School District Governing Board of Education is represented by five board members who are elected by the community to provide leadership and oversight of the Yorbas School District's schools and operations. Like other governing boards, the Yorbas Board of Education works with the district's superintendent to fulfill its major functions, including setting direction for the district, providing basic organizational structure by establishing policies, ensuring accountability of school district leaders, and providing community leadership.

### **The Origin of the YELI Family-School Partnership**

In the summer of 2015, Armando, the founder of the YELI family-school partnership, brought together various organizations to apply for a capacity-building request for proposal issued by the local First 5 agencies. First 5 had issued a capacity-building grant request for applications (RFA) for coalitions interested in using a collective impact approach to bolster their collaborative bodies' efforts to advance First 5's priorities. Collective impact, as defined by Kania and Kramer (2011), requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions. Key priorities for First 5 were to improve school readiness, early literacy and language development, early STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education, and early learning quality improvement programs. After learning about the First 5 RFA, Armando convened four non-profit organizational leaders to gauge their interest in forming a collective impact approach to form a genuine collaborative focused on improving early childhood outcomes across the City of Yorbas. Due to his professional work as a consultant and his volunteer experience as a community leader, Armando had established trust and capital with these organizational leaders. The four organizations consisted of the Esqueda Center, La Luna Academy, a local AFL-CIO, and the National Social Policy Institute.

In 2015, Armando was serving as board president for the Esqueda Center, a non-profit community-based organization whose mission is to advance self-sufficiency through sustainable programs in health, education, financial stability, and community engagement in the City of Yorbas. During this time, Armando was actively volunteering at La Luna Academy, the elementary school where his children were enrolled. Armando also had a strong relationship with the executive director of the local AFL-CIO labor council, which represents more than 90 local unions with a membership of 180,000+ working people. The National Social Policy Institute

(NSPI) was also brought in to serve as the grant recipient and provide administrative, logistical, and technical assistance during the initial formational phase of the YELI family-school partnership. NSPI is a national, nonprofit policy organization that connects community action, public system reform, and policy change to create a fair and just society.

During one of his interviews, Armando shared how the initial group of organizations came together because of a shared concern regarding the challenges that families with young children were experiencing in the City of Yorbas. Armando stated:

“...those were the initial organizations that I was working with and we were concerned about families with little kids and those were the families that were coming into Esqueda Center for food. They were also coming in for food at La Luna Academy with their preschool program, and then when I was talking to the director of the local AFL-CIO labor council, their members who had very young children were experiencing problems at work because they did not have who to take care of their kids. They would miss or show up late, so they were also encountering problems with respect to their work. We thought about coming together to see what we can do to support families with very young children, infants, and toddlers...” (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

During their initial conversations, the core group members began learning about Collective Impact and brainstorming various approaches, best practices, and data to understand the early education landscape and to improve early learning outcomes across the city. The group identified the Two-Generation model as a promising approach for working with low-income, mostly Latinx immigrant families in the City of Yorbas. The Aspen Institute defines the Two-Generation model as an approach that builds family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives by centering the whole family to create a legacy of educational success and economic prosperity that passes from one generation to the next ([ascend.aspeninstitute.org](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org)). The two-generation model is rooted in the belief that service delivery systems working with low-income families must address the families' economic needs in order to help young children achieve and sustain positive early childhood

outcomes. In addition, the partnership's core group explored two data instruments to inform and measure early learning outcomes and financial duress: the Early Development Instrument (Offord Centre for Child Studies) and United Ways Family Financial Stability Index ([unitedwayoc.org](http://unitedwayoc.org)). The Early Development Index is a tool designed to measure early child development in five key domains: physical health, emotional maturity, social competence, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge (Offord Centre for Child Studies). The Family Financial Stability Index is a tool that measures progress on reducing the percentage of financially unstable families across the nation.

As the core group gained a deeper understanding of the early education landscape and conditions impacting families, its members recognized the need to bring in additional organizations, especially organizations working to support early learning as well as the economic, housing, and health needs of children and families. Over the course of the summer and fall of 2016, the core group gradually had expanded to nearly 15 organizations across a wide range of sectors including early education, health, student supports, family engagement, economic empowerment, housing rights, research, and local and county government. While the group of organizations grew and engaged in conversations around improving early learning outcomes, Armando launched a successful campaign and was elected as a governing board member of the Yorbas Unified School Board in November 2016. The school board election marked a significant moment for the YELI family-school partnership as it brought in the school district as a critical partner.

Armando decided to run for office to improve early childhood outcomes and ensure the school district committed to and actively supported the YELI family-school partnership. As highlighted in my interview excerpt below, Armando believed that community-based

investments for large-scale population level changes required engaging institutions and systems directly responsible for population-level outcomes. Particularly, Armando argued that the Yorbas Unified School District needed to be a key supportive participant within the partnership to successfully improve early learning outcomes across the city of Yorbas. For Armando, this insight crystallized after partaking in several community-based early childhood investments that sought population-level outcomes but that neglected to engage the school systems, such as First 5 Los Angeles' Best Start Initiative (<https://www.first5la.org/best-start-networks/>). Therefore, to ensure that the Yorbas Unified School District engaged as a key partner, Armando shared how he needed to gain entry to the institution and steer it toward supporting a community-driven collaborative approach to improve early childhood outcomes. In an early 2023 interview with Armando, he explained:

“in order for us to have population level impact, we have to leverage institutions that operate at a population level and the district is one of those right...it's mandated that all children go to school...so for me you cover a lot of children in a geography by leveraging the resources of a school district that is already required to impact all those children within that population in that geography...one of the reasons why collective impact, I think, starts from a systems leaders perspective was, I think, they acknowledged that you need to bring the systems into the room, right? But the critical one for me is the educational system...the institution that has by definition a responsibility to work educationally and to develop and to grow children...If you want to get to population level results, you can choose not to work with the school system but then how are you going to get the resources to really impact all the children, right? So what organizations end up doing is they end up relying on advocacy work to trigger policy and system change for the very institution that I'm referring to, so my strategy was I'm going to run for office to get inside of the institution from a governance standpoint...you need to have someone on the inside the school system because if you're not on the inside, you don't have the ability to move, you're not the driver of that system, right?” (Interview, February 2023)

Consequently, by early 2017, the school district's executive leadership cabinet formally joined the YELI family-school partnership planning meetings. By July 2017, school principals across seven schools were brought in and the emerging partnership decided to begin formally

developing shared goals, benchmarks, and an outcomes dashboard. By December 2017, the partnership decided to organize and launch three spark projects, which were defined as short-term, voluntary, and collaborative projects that could be implemented by an existing group of organizational actors without the need for external resources. The spark projects were intended to fuel momentum and encourage alignment and a culture of sharing, while organizational and institutional partners learned how to work with each other. The first spark project led to the formation of an Early Childhood Education (ECE) team amongst its members focused on supporting children ages 0 to 3 and their families using the school district's Wellness Centers and through the formation of parent-led neighborhood leadership teams that would identify, inform, and connect families to formal and informal resources in their neighborhoods. The ECE team also supported neighborhood canvassing activities to recruit students for preschool and kindergarten registration. The second spark project led to the formation of a Preschool to Fourth Grade team focused on developing a family empowerment curriculum for parents with children ages 0 to 9. Team members focused on helping parents understand key early childhood development milestones and building practical skills to help children develop their literacy, numeracy, physical skills, and emotional and social competencies. The third spark project formed a Family Economic Success (FES) team who decided to promote and help coordinate service providers offering economic supports for families experiencing economic duress. The FES team developed a resource directory of family economic supports, created data sharing agreements, and crafted referral and linkage protocols among service providers.

### **Tension #1: Exclusion of Parents**

As the partners were planning the spark projects, community-based organizations began questioning the lack of parent involvement in the partnership, and this led to the first key tension

in the YELI family-school partnership. From 2015 through early 2018, the YELI family-school partnership only included members or representatives of community-based organizations, the school district, philanthropy, local and county government agencies, and higher research institutions. Parents and families were not involved in the initial formational phases of the partnership, and by 2018, community-based organizations—especially those that worked closely with parents and advocated for educational equity—began questioning and resisting continued efforts to advance a collaborative early childhood educational equity agenda without the participation and leadership of parents and families.

Maria Cruz, the executive director of Familias Fuertes, a key organizational partner in the YELI family-school partnership, shared how she struggled with the lack of parent involvement. Maria Cruz represented a well-known grassroots community-based organization focused on empowering parents and families as community leaders in the city of Yorbas, and she was concerned that the exclusion of parents would prevent and undermine the success of the partnership. This concern around parent exclusion was heard by the founder, Armando, and school district leaders, including Ingrid—the school district’s director of family engagement. In response to the concerns and pushback, both Armando and Ingrid offered a justification for the exclusion of parents by accentuating the importance and need for organizational and institutional partners to develop trust and commitment to the shared vision. However, it became clear that a hidden agenda centered around the importance of the ensuring that the school district bought in and committed to the YELI family-school partnership. To ensure the district’s buy-in, the school district and partners needed time to think through and clarify their shared vision, goals, outcomes, and collective strategies to improve early learning outcomes. Community organizations were concerned with the exclusion of parents because of the school district’s

history of traditional, dominant, deficit-oriented, school-centered practices that, intentionally or not, pre-defined the role of parents as passive clients. In response to this concern, the exclusion of parents was explained as a momentary process while the organizational and institutional partners got their “shit together.” Maria Cruz, and other organizational representatives, were assured that parents were pivotal to the partnership’s success and would help drive the YELI family-school partnership forward. This tension emerged in the formative phase of the YELI family-school partnership, when community-based organizations began pushing back on the decision to exclude parents from an initiative focused on improving early learning outcomes, and centering parents and families with young children. Chapter Six provides a detailed overview of the tension and analysis, highlighting how the enacted response strategy fostered an equitable approach for collaboration within the YELI family-school partnership.

### **Tension #2: Mosca Muerta (Dead Fly)**

After the organizations and institutional partners got their “shit together,” the group decided to involve and integrate parents and families in the pre-established spark projects in the summer of 2018. Specifically, the ECE spark project team developed a proposal to, using the Wellness Centers, reach families and children 0 to 3 years old who were disconnected from services and resources. To achieve this goal, the ECE team developed a comprehensive parent leadership capacity-building program. The idea was that parents who successfully participated in the leadership program would form parent-led neighborhood leadership teams and they would help connect families to resources and services through the school district Wellness Centers. By July 2018, the ECE team had started organizing neighborhood summits at local elementary schools to recruit parents for the leadership program. By Fall 2018, the ECE team launched the six-month parent leadership capacity-building program focused on building a deeper

understanding of early childhood development and strengthening leadership skills. The Yorbas Unified School District covered expenses for food and transportation for parents to participate in the parent leadership sessions at the Esqueda Center.

The parent leadership curriculum included a strategic action research project centered on parents co-designing what the school district Wellness Centers would offer and how they would operate. For example, program documents highlight hundreds of parent-led interviews, neighborhood needs assessments, and asset maps to inform the design of Wellness Centers. In December 2018, parents presented their wellness center models during a parent leadership session at a local high school. The idea was that since the Yorbas Unified School District was planning to open Wellness Centers in several elementary schools in 2019, parent leaders in the YELI family-school partnership would work with the district to orchestrate resources and services for the surrounding communities. By Spring 2019, however, this idea ran into and hit a “bureaucratic wall.”

The majority of the Yorbas school board and the school district executive cabinet were not in alignment with the YELI family-school partnership’s idea and strategy around the Wellness Centers. And, since the success of this strategy depended on the school district’s approval and support, the school district ended up undermining this effort. Ingrid shared how the school district questioned the role and capacity of parents to co-design the Wellness Centers. She described how the school district belittled parent knowledge and expertise by highlighting how the school district was using a “Harvard model” to design the Wellness Centers. Here, Ingrid suggested that the school district was already using an evidence-based best practice approach for the Wellness Centers, and therefore there was no need to involve parents in a co-design process. As a result, the school district undermined this parent-driven effort to design Wellness Centers

by applying the “mosca muerta” (dead fly) approach. The ‘mosca muerta’ approach involves the proactive use of administrative and bureaucratic mechanisms within the school district to undermine key efforts, such as the YELI family-school partnership strategy with the Wellness Centers.

The school district undermined the strategy through an influx of administrative and bureaucratic mechanisms. For example, the family engagement liaisons, who were hired to staff the Wellness Centers, were not allowed to work until they completed a two-month onboarding process before being placed at a school. Program documents also highlight challenges with the hiring and onboarding of the family engagement liaisons, which led to the school being unable to open Wellness Centers on schedule. Additionally, the district’s process to establish memorandum of understandings (MOUs) with community-based organizations took much longer than expected due to several issues elevated by the district’s risk management department. For example, the district’s risk management department elevated issues with regulations, background checks, supervision of parents on the campus’ Wellness Centers, and concerns with undocumented parents accessing the district’s Wellness Centers. Another challenge concerned the family engagement liaisons being unable to refer parents to external resources or services due to a collective bargaining issue.

Furthermore, I found that a political divide within the school board also fueled the school district’s ‘mosca muerta’ approach and bureaucratic wall. In 2019, the conservative Board President (Rosa), who had the majority vote, clashed with Armando’s politics on educational equity. Board President Rosa, along with the school district’s superintendent (Leilani) and the director of family engagement (Olivia), used this political tension to enforce a contrasting vision for the Wellness Centers, one focused on only providing services to students, not to families and

the broader community. Besides, Rosa, Leilani, and Olivia wanted to situate the Wellness Centers at Yorba's middle schools, not the elementary schools.

The inability to advance the school-centered strategy with the Wellness Centers frustrated parents and organizational partners within the YELI family-school partnership. Consequently, parent leaders began questioning the authenticity of the YELI family-school partnership and many parents stopped attending partnership meetings. The resistance from parents forced the partnership to rethink its strategy with the Wellness Centers. Thus, to address this tension, the YELI family-school partnership shifted gears and adopted a set of community-centered strategies that focused on expanding the parent leadership program, building trust and relationships between parents and school principals, and the formation of a parent-led advocacy task force. In Chapter Six, I analyze this tension and the enacted response strategy in more detail and argue how the response strategy fostered an approach for equitable collaboration.

#### *COVID-19 Pandemic & Transitions*

By Spring 2020, the YELI family-school partnership was preparing to implement numerous parent-led projects along with a community governance system, using a core group, steering committee, and general assembly based on the Promesa Boyle Heights model (<https://www.promesaboyleheights.org>). However, in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the partnership to shift gears. The YELI family-school partnership organized two parent-led teams. The first team focused on providing information to families on how to access resources during the pandemic, and the second team focused on advocacy to increase affordable housing and access to open green space. During this time there were also major changes and transitions taking place within the Yorbas Unified School District. The district selected a new superintendent, and almost the entire district's executive cabinet was replaced shortly thereafter.

By Fall 2020, Armando won his re-election campaign for school board, this time forming part of a new majority.

During an interview, Armando claimed that in 2021 he and the school board worked with the new superintendent to address the underlying structural issues that had stalled the implementation of YELI family-school partnership's strategy with the Wellness Centers. At the same time, the YELI family-school partnership continued expanding their parent leadership and capacity-building program, increasing the number of participating elementary schools from 13 to 20 schools. By the fall of 2021, more than 400 parents had successfully participated in the parent leadership and capacity-building trainings. More importantly, the YELI parent-led advocacy team successfully achieved the first ever rent control and just cause eviction ordinance in the City of Yorbas.

By early 2022, with a new governing board, new leadership at the school district, and a robust number of parent leaders, the YELI family-school partnership appeared ready to reconvene in person after nearly two years of online meetings, and continue building momentum operating in a new context and political environment. Yet, by March 2022, Yolanda, the director of the YELI family-school partnership's backbone organization, submitted her letter of resignation.

Yolanda became involved with the YELI family-school partnership in 2018. She was an undergraduate student enrolled in a Chicano studies class taught by Armando, and through this course, Yolanda learned about and expressed her interest in supporting the YELI family-school partnership. In one of my interviews with Armando, he described how he invested substantial time building the leadership capacity of Yolanda to manage the YELI family-school partnership. Yolanda also brought a unique set of values, hard work, and passion for working with the

community, and subsequently built trust and strong relationships with parents, organizations, and the school district. Thus, Yolanda's resignation created a critical gap in the partnership.

### **Tension #3: Blaming School Principals**

From March through June 2022, the YELI family-school partnership prioritized hiring a new director. Meanwhile Sofia, the existing program coordinator in the backbone organization, was appointed as its interim director. Yet, Sofia was also relatively new to the partnership, having served as a coordinator for less than a year. Consequently, Armando, the founder, played a leadership role to hire and onboard a new director. By June 2022, Gloria was hired as the new director of the YELI family-school partnership's backbone organization. Gloria, a daughter of Guatemalan immigrants, was a first-generation Latina college graduate. Although Gloria had graduated with a Ph.D. a few weeks before accepting the director position, in her interviews, she shared how she did not have experience working with and managing community-based partnerships. Nonetheless, I understood that Gloria was hired due to her background, personal and professional values, and staunch interest, passion, and commitment to educational equity.

Both Gloria and Sofia began managing the YELI family-school partnership in the fall of 2022. During this time, the Yorbas Unified School District was also adjusting to leadership transitions as several elementary schools had new principals and the school district had not yet hired a new director of family engagement. The transitions within the backbone agency and the school district led to a tension flaring up concerning the district's school principals being unresponsive to requests from parents and the backbone agency to engage with the YELI family-school partnership.

According to Ingrid, this tension emerged as a result of three factors: first, the new principals did not engage because they did not understand the history and significance of the

YELI family-school partnership; second, the principals felt attacked by the backbone agency and parents' communication tactics; and third, the school district had yet to hire a director of family engagement to serve as the point person between the backbone agency and school district. In other words, this tension emerged because the school district and school principals operate from school-centered paradigms, and the requests to engage the YELI family-school partnership were seen as external, voluntary demands without institutional authority or significance.

To address this tension, the school district expedited the search and hiring of a director of family engagement to provide guidance and authority, and who clarified and affirmed its institutional communication protocols. Ingrid, who was appointed as the new director of family engagement in Fall 2022, described how her new role helped address this tension between the backbone agency and school district. Ingrid argued that new principals were not aware of the history and significance of the YELI family-school partnership, and principals did not have clear guidance from the district regarding their roles in the partnership. In Chapter Five, I describe and analyze this tension and Ingrid's response strategy in more detail and argue how this response strategy undermined approaches for equitable collaboration.

#### **Tension #4: Lack of Capacity to Design Parent Leadership Development Curriculum**

During December 2022, the YELI family-school partnership convened its first in-person general assembly meeting in more than two years, and by January 2023, the partnership launched its parent leadership training series at the Esqueda Center. In preparation for the parent leadership training, Gloria and Sofia formed a planning team to develop and support the implementation of the curriculum. The planning team met weekly and included Gloria and Sofia from the backbone agency and Ingrid and Renata from the school district. Although Armando, the founder, was invited to the planning meetings, he did not attend the meetings I observed from

January through April 2023. However, based on interviews with Gloria, I learned that Armando offered to support and provide feedback on the parent leadership curriculum, but it was not clear whether or how often Gloria met with Armando to review the curriculum. I also learned that Armando's absence from the planning team was the result of his decision to step back and distance himself as a leader from the partnership to enable Gloria to manage the YELI family-school partnership.

On Friday, February 24, 2023, the YELI family-school partnership held its second of five parent leadership training sessions. As was the norm, more than 200 parents and several school principals and family engagement liaisons were in attendance at the session at the Esqueda Center. During the second half of the three-hour training, I noticed Armando was frustrated with the lack of parent engagement with a learning activity intended to help parents understand the early development instrument. In fact, Armando interrupted the session to explain the purpose of the early development instrument and how it aligned with the vision of the YELI family-school partnership as well as to clarify the task at the table level.

After the session concluded, Armando asked the planning team to stick around to debrief and reflect on the session. During the debrief, Armando lifted up his concern about the specific learning activity, claiming there was a 'slippage in learning,' and this led to a longer discussion on the agenda, time management, and who has the skills and capacity to design and facilitate effective parent-centered leadership curriculum. Indirectly, Armando's feedback implied that Gloria and Sofia did not have capacity to design learning activities. Gloria and Sofia pushed back, implying that Armando's critique encompassed everyone in the planning team, which included Ingrid and Renata from the school district, as well as Armando, who had been invited to but had not attended the planning team meetings. Put differently, Gloria argued that the learning

slippage was the result of the limitations of the entire planning team, not just Gloria and Sofia. Gloria and Sofia's resistance to Armando's critique revealed a tension concerning who had the knowledge, skills, expertise, and power to define and determine what counted as an effective parent leadership curriculum. To address this tension, Armando suggested that Ingrid and Renata, because of their roles in the school district and professional backgrounds, were best equipped to lead the design of the parent leadership training curriculum. In Chapter Five, I analyze how this response strategy undermined equitable collaboration by centering school leaders as the experts, and curtailing the knowledge, skills, and expertise of parents, families, and community stakeholders.

#### **Tension #5: The Perceived Takeover**

While Gloria and Sofia were ramping up efforts with the steering committee, general assembly, and parent leadership training, the Yorbas Unified School District began sharing that it had been awarded a five-year \$6 million California Community Schools Partnership grant. The California Department of Education (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/ccspp.asp>) describes the California Community Schools Partnership program as an effort to support schools in building partnerships with community agencies and local government to align community resources to improve student outcomes. On October 28, 2022, the YELI family-school district—in collaboration with the Yorbas Unified School District—organized a community forum to present the details of the community-schools grant. At the community forum, I observed how the school district presented the community-schools initiative that closely resembled the goals, outcomes, strategies, and a theory of change of the YELI family-school partnership. For example, the district's community-school initiative's goals consisted of strengthening the coordination and alignment of systems to increase access to resources and services; and second, establishing

schools as community hubs through the Wellness Centers. The community-schools forum left Gloria with the impression that the school district was going to take over the YELI family-school partnership.

Gloria's concerns grew after the school district applied the 'mosca muerta' approach by not responding to several requests to engage and discuss the alignment between the YELI family-school partnership and the district's community-schools initiative. After several attempts to engage the school district, Gloria lifted up the emerging tension with Armando, who responded by scheduling a two-hour 'alignment' meeting on March 24, 2023, which took place immediately following the third parent leadership training session at the Esqueda Center. Although Armando shared that the purpose of the meeting was to strengthen alignment amongst the school district and the YELI family-school partnership, as the meeting unfolded, it became evident that the real purpose was to address the tension surrounding the community-schools initiative. The meeting involved the school district's executive cabinet, the backbone organization for the YELI family-school partnership, First 5 Yorba's program officer, and a professor from UC Yorbas. The alignment meeting began with an extensive overview of the history, vision, and values of the YELI family-school partnership, which set the context for the ensuing discussion that revealed how the school district operated from a school-centric paradigm, and what needed to change to foster a more equitable approach for collaboration. In Chapter Six, I discuss and analyze this tension and response strategy in more detail, and underline how Armando's response strategy helped foster an equitable approach for collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I highlighted how key tensions emerged during YELI family-school partnership, the context that shaped each tension, and briefly outlined the enacted response strategies used to address the tensions. Here, I described each tension in chronological order, not in the order of significance, to situate each tension within its context and the timeline of the YELI family-school partnership. The first tension arises from the exclusion of parents in the goal-setting process. This tension emerged after community-based organizations pushed back on the lack of parent involvement in the YELI family-school partnership. The second tension emerged from the school district's desire and decision to control how the Wellness Centers were designed and should function, which undermined the intent of the YELI family-school partnership leaders bringing parents and the school district's family engagement liaisons together to co-design the Wellness Centers. The third tension emerged after school principals were not responsive to parents and the backbone organization's requests to engage with the YELI family-school partnership. The fourth tension emerged during the implementation of a parent leadership training session, where Armando critiqued the planning committee's capacity to design effective learning activities for parents. The fifth tension emerged after the school district presented its new community-schools model and initiative, raising concerns by the backbone agency that the school district was planning to take over the YELI family-school partnership.

All five of the tensions are cases of how resistance unfolded within the YELI family-school partnership. The findings in this study highlight tensions as cases of resistance to conventional, dominant, deficit-oriented, school-centric approaches for collaboration. These tensions highlight the complexity of trying to depart from dominant school-centric approaches for collaboration, specifically across the four dimensions of the equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2020). The tensions found in this study illuminate the challenges of

cultivating and embracing a culture of shared responsibility for systemic change; recognizing nondominant parents as experts and educational leaders; developing and implementing adaptive strategies that build trust, relationships, and capacity for systems change; and acknowledging that schools are situated in broader community contexts shaped by social, economic, and political realities. In the next two findings chapters, I used a conceptual lens that combined Solorzano & Bernal's (2001) transformational resistance with Ishimaru (2020) equitable collaboration framework to examine the enacted response strategies used to address each of these five tensions. Chapter Five describes how the enacted responses strategies addressed the tension with the unresponsive school principals and the tension with the slippage of learning in the parent leadership training, undermined efforts to foster more equitable collaboration. Chapter Six details how the enacted response strategies used to address the tensions around the inclusion and exclusion of parents, the Wellness Centers, and the community-schools initiative, helped shift the YELI family-school partnership toward a more equitable approach for collaboration.

## **Chapter 5: The Destabilizing School-Centric Reflex: Undermining Equitable Collaboration**

In this chapter, I examine how two enacted response strategies undermined efforts to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration in the YELI family-school partnership. Specifically, I describe how the enacted response strategies conformed to a dominant school-centric logic that instinctively respected the knowledge and expertise of school leaders, while they implicitly devalued and dismissed the knowledge and expertise of parents and community leaders, including the backbone agency managing the YELI family-school partnership. My findings highlight how a school-centric logic can permeate as an unconscious reflex that is activated by those in power to address tensions within the YELI family-school partnership. Essentially, I narrate how two school-centric and conformist response strategies undermined efforts to foster more equitable collaboration.

### **Tension #3: Blaming School Principals**

The summer of 2022 can be described as a transitional period for the YELI family-school partnership. The school district and the backbone agency were experiencing leadership transitions. Specifically, the school district had appointed a new director of family engagement, new principals were brought into key elementary schools, and the backbone agency had just hired a new executive director. At the same time, the founder and leader of the YELI family-school partnership was no longer able to dedicate the same amount of time supporting, managing, and facilitating the different moving pieces of the initiative.

By the end of the summer, the backbone agency decided to re-start convening the YELI family-school partnership, which had been in two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To kick things off, the backbone agency decided to organize an in-person ‘general assembly’ meeting to welcome new participants, share the history of the initiative, provide an

update of the vision and work plan, and recruit new parents to participate in the parent leadership training program. To support with outreach, the backbone agency brought together an active group of parent leaders who had been involved in the partnership's work over multiple years. Yet as soon as the parents and backbone agency began conducting their outreach activities, they ran into a key hurdle with the school principals. Several school principals, especially those who were new, were not being responsive to the backbone agency or parents' invitation to participate in the YELI family-school partnership. In this chapter, I explore how the enacted response to this tension conformed to a hierarchical school-centered communication approach disguised as an administrative efficiency.

### ***The Resignation***

In February 2022, Yolanda the executive director of the YELI family-school partnership, resigned. Yolanda's resignation created a pivotal leadership gap at a critical moment for the YELI family-school partnership, which had spent the last couple of years building support from the majority of the Yorbas Unified School Board members and the school district's executive cabinet. Armando explained how the YELI family-school partnership had reached an ideal moment at the time because the school board and school district leadership understood and supported the initiative's vision, purpose, and strategies. Armando stated:

...so I think right now we're in a transitional phase, we have full support from the board, we have a superintendent now that gets the importance of early education, we have people on the executive cabinet like Baudelia, Brenda, Renata, etc., particularly Baudelia and Brenda, and Ingrid, who were involved in YELI from the ground up, so now they are in institutional positions to implement the vision and strategies that we have. So right now, we are in I think, the most ideal, not perfect, but the most ideal position within the district to support YELI than we've ever been, there's complete and utter, a lot of alignment there. (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

Yolanda had spent years building relational trust with parents, community organizations, and the school district, and had become the face of the YELI family-school partnership. Thus, her resignation was a significant setback for the YELI family-school partnership. Ingrid, the school district director of family engagement, described Yolanda's departure as abrupt and unexpected. She explained how it created a significant void in the YELI family-school partnership:

...everyone was very well connected to Yolanda, like she was super respected, she was always so kind and like helpful, like she went out of her way to make things easier for like principals, like, you know, for everybody involved. Like she took on, I don't know how she did it, but she took on like a majority of the work, right, and for a while there, she was doing all the work by herself, so she was the one making the connections to the parents, she was the one that was like making sure people knew what was happening...her transition happened like during COVID, so that was what made it a little bit more difficult because it felt like we never really even got to say goodbye to Yolanda right, so all the parents that had already been working with her to establish those bonds and that commitment, like no they don't want to say we lost contact, but we kind of did through COVID and then the change was kind of abrupt, like it happened very fast. (Interview with Ingrid, December 2022)

In contrast, Sofia and Esmeralda were not surprised by the resignation, arguing that Yolanda had ultimately burned out. According to Esmeralda, Yolanda was a 'one woman show' who kept the partnership afloat due to her unrelenting drive to improve educational outcomes in Yorbas.

Esmeralda explained:

...I think she just got burned out, too, because again, one person doing all the logistics, because she was creating the content, you know, the workshops, educational part of it, doing all the outreach, doing all this, and then you know, putting out fires with parents' personal issues, and then all the logistics of like the meetings and the food and the transportation, it was all on her... (Interview with Esmeralda, November 2022)

Therefore, by Spring 2022, the YELI family-school partnership had shifted gears to search and hire a new executive director for its backbone agency. Importantly, Yolanda's resignation led to the need for Armando to step back in and lead the search and onboarding of the new executive director. Although Armando was and continues being perceived as the founder and principal

leader of the YELI family-school partnership by external agencies and funders, Armando was no longer actively involved with the day-to-day management of the partnership.

Armando's limited capacity meant that the new executive director would not benefit from his extensive guidance and mentorship that was provided to Yolanda. Despite the acknowledgement of his limited capacity, however, Armando described how he prioritized candidates who demonstrated a staunch commitment for community empowerment and social justice. Armando shared that he was looking for candidates "que se le vean las ganas," which translated to candidates who had a "keen desire and thirst" for community building. According to Armando, finding a new executive director with an authentic passion for community empowerment and educational equity was more important than bringing in someone with nonprofit management experience, suggesting that it was more difficult to help someone develop an authentic commitment for educational equity, than learning and building the skills and competencies to manage the YELI family-school partnership. Particularly, Armando described how building the skills and competencies to manage the partnership stemmed from years of experience and failure, and to build these competencies, the new executive director would need to have an authentic drive and desire to commit to this learning process. Armando stated:

I think the community organizing process is itself a competency, like how do you organize folks? And how do you organize them around advocacy work related to policy, such as housing...the other is these other more formal frameworks of protective factors, strengthening families, two generation model, collective impact, outcomes based results work, those kinds of bodies of work and tools... but it's how do you understand it, how do you then apply it, and how do you build the expertise of application, that takes time right...the other skill set is training and education, and so that's like these leadership development programs, you have to know about curriculum development, pedagogy, instruction, assessment, practice...and that's a discipline, that's a practice, and that comes out of a lot of experience and a lot of mistakes that I've made, that we've made... you know they have to fail sometimes, just as we did, for them to evolve that practice. (Interview with Armando, February 2023)

### *An Environment for Tensions to Emerge*

By June 2022, Gloria was introduced as the new director of the YELI family-school partnership. Gloria is a first-generation Latina college graduate from South Los Angeles, and proud daughter of two hard-working immigrant parents. Prior to starting her new role, Gloria had recently earned a doctoral degree in education. Gloria described the opportunity to serve as the executive director of the YELI family-school partnership as a dream come true and expressed her excitement and commitment to working with parents, organizations, and the school district to advance educational equity in Yorbas. Yet, Gloria also acknowledged that her new role had a significant learning curve, and although this was the first time she would serve as an executive director, she was confident that her support system would lead towards success. Gloria stated:

...to be honest again, I think it would have been so much harder and more difficult if it was just like, here you go, and I didn't have other people who had been part of the process, or who had knowledge of the community, because then it's not only a learning curve in terms of running like the collaborative but also learning curve of getting to know everyone in the collaborative... (Interview with Gloria, October 2022)

Gloria described how Armando helped reduce the pressure of her new role by emphasizing that the YELI family-school partnership was in a transitional phase, and that Gloria had an opportunity to influence and shape the direction and structure of the partnership moving forward.

When I came in, they did tell me like they were in a transition or in a phase where they're trying to re-energize or revamp a lot of the infrastructure and organization, so they did tell me like in some way it is sort of flexible, right? So, then I didn't feel like everything had to be perfect, it's like it's a collaborative space, and we are like redesigning in a way together, so I think also that took away some pressure, like in terms of "oh, I might not be meeting the structure, the goals, or whatever." (Interview with Gloria, February 2023)

Considering the unique moment of key school district leadership supporting the YELI family-school partnership, Gloria's transition as the new executive director occurred at the same time the school district was also undergoing leadership transitions with several elementary school

principals. Although Sofia, the backbone agency's program coordinator, was hired a few months prior to Yolanda's resignation, both Gloria and Sofia lacked the relational trust and capital that Yolanda had built with school principals and school district leaders over the years.

Unsurprisingly, the combination of new leadership at the backbone agency and new elementary schools cultivated an environment in which tensions could flare, and tensions had already flared by the start of the 2022-23 school year.

### ***Calling Out Unresponsive School Principals***

According to Gloria, Sofia, and several parent leaders, the school principals were not responding to the invitations and requests to engage with the YELI family-school partnership. Esmeralda, the backbone agency's administrative coordinator, and Isabella, a parent leader, claimed that the school principals' unresponsiveness suggested that the principals did not value and care enough to prioritize the educational success of students. In the following excerpt from one of her interviews, Esmeralda talks about how school principals would say one thing but do something else:

...another challenge would be some of the principals say they're on board, but they're not always hands on, and I know it's been tough with the pandemic, and through last summer that they were trying to, shifting from virtual to in-person, they just were so like busy with everything they were doing. So I know that they didn't always have the capacity or the time or energy involved, but if we would get more support from those principals that haven't been around too much that have been part of YELI but not physically present, I think that would help... (Interview with Esmeralda, November 2022).

Isabella argued that the school principals' lack of involvement hindered the success of the YELI family-school partnership, and described how school principals served as gatekeepers who could shape what and how students, parents, and families accessed information, opportunities, and resources. Isabella stated:

...necesitamos que haya más compromiso de los directores de las escuelas, porque hay directores que si son un poquito como fríos...hay unos que no participan, y esos que no participan, los padres no se enteran de los recursos, los niños no pueden maximizar su potencial, no pueden tener la oportunidad de acceder a esos recursos, a las oportunidades, a poder desarrollarse mejor...yo creo que somos una cadena, o sea, somos eslabones, entonces, no puede haber con un solo eslabón que no se una, que no se conecte, no sigue creciendo, entonces necesitamos que haya eslabones que todos se unan...para que en realidad se pueda conseguir el objetivo. (Entrevista con Isabella, enero del 2023)

English translation: ...we need more commitment from school principals, because there are principals who are a little cold...there are some who do not participate, and those who do not participate, the parents do not find out about the resources, the children cannot maximize their potential, they cannot have the opportunity to access those resources, to the opportunities, to be able to develop better... I believe that we are a chain, that is, we are links, so there cannot be a single link that does not join, that does not connect, that does not continue to grow, so we need links that all come together... so that the objective can actually be achieved. (Interview with Isabella, January 2023)

In contrast, Ingrid and Renata contested the argument that principals did not care and explained that school principals were overwhelmed, misunderstood, and were unfairly scolded by parents and the backbone organization. Both Ingrid and Renata clarified that the new school principals were not engaging with the YELI family-school partnership because they were overwhelmed with all the responsibilities and challenges managing and administrating their elementary schools. Particularly, Ingrid argued that all school principals valued and prioritized the educational success of all students:

It's not that we haven't had principal support or buy-in, and can I tell you it's that the system has been overwhelmed. So when you have principals who aren't coming to meetings, in the beginning we were all, like a lot of were going to meetings all the time, but, you'll see that I've had to miss a lot of meetings as a principals especially because, or even now, because I have two meetings at the exact same time, do I go to the superintendent's advisory where I play a role in parents having a voice at the superintendents table, or do I go to the YELI steering committee, right? Like it's making those really tough choices, or when I was a principal, I'm sorry, but half the time when we had the Friday YELI meetings, that's my worse day, we were short on subs, there was one day that I was trying to listen into the YELI meeting as I'm teaching three third grade classes in my library, right. So, it's about a system that's

kind of been overwhelmed and impacted, and it's not that they don't want to buy into it... (Interview with Ingrid, December 2022)

Renata explained that school principals were unresponsive due to the administrative burdens of managing their school sites in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and implied how the backbone organization and parents misinterpreted the school principals' unresponsiveness to mean that school principals did not value or care about the YELI family-school partnership or student success. Renata stated:

...and so from YELI's perspective, what I've heard is, we really need our site administrators to be more active, participate, be at our meetings, log on to our calls...but again, especially during COVID, and then post, principals were covering classes because teachers were out, our children came back with lots of social emotional issues that principals were supporting with...we had spotty attendance from our administrators, and I think that maybe it could be seen from YELI's perspective as they're not engaged, they don't value this work... (Interview with Renata, February 2023)

### ***School District Leaders Blame the Backbone Agency***

According to Ingrid, the tension was not solely due to a simple misunderstanding. She suggested that the new and inexperienced leadership at the backbone organization produced the tension with school principals. Ingrid contrasted the leadership approaches and styles of Gloria, Sofia, and Yolanda, with a clear preference for Yolanda's leadership style, highlighting the importance and need to build relational trust with the new school principals, instead of scolding or calling out the school principals for not engaging. Ingrid stated:

...I think one of the challenges with the buy-in was also to that things changed, leadership changed, people, I mean after COVID, right here Yolanda leaves amidst COVID, and I have to tell you Yolanda was a driving force...she connected with each principal...she had a very calm kind of personality, it wasn't I got you, it was we are working together, and it was a sense of like understanding that principals are doing a lot...principals don't need to be scolded for not going, right...there was no pointing fingers, it was not a principals aren't doing this...and I haven't called anybody out on it but like I was just trying to figure out like, what is it? Why are they attacking family engagement liaisons, and the principals aren't doing this, are not doing that, and that to

me, isn't going to build a relationship at all, that's honestly cutting ties or burning bridges... (Interview with Ingrid, December 2022)

Ingrid argued that as part of building relationships and trust, the new elementary school principals needed the backbone agency's leadership to help them learn and understand the history, vision, and purpose of the YELI family-school partnership. Ingrid was concerned that Gloria and Sofia did not make a good first impression with the new elementary school principals, and rather than opening the door for collaboration, they were burning their bridges. Ingrid, who was appointed as the school district's director of family engagement in October 2022, suggested that since the school district did not have a director of family engagement, the school district lacked the leadership needed to effectively navigate and address the tension over the unresponsive school principals. Specifically, Ingrid insinuated that through her new role as a districtwide administrative leader, she focused on repairing the tension between backbone agency and elementary school principals.

### ***School District Establishes Communication Protocol***

In response to the tension, Ingrid establishes a communication protocol between the YELI family-school partnership and the school district. Instead of parents and external organizations reaching out to the elementary school principals, all communication related to the YELI family-school partnership would go through the school district's Office of Community Engagement. This new protocol centralized the communication process within the school district, which created a mechanism for the Office of Community Engagement to oversee and manage the different types of requests being made of school principals and family engagement liaisons. According to Ingrid, the school principals were unresponsive because parents and the backbone agency did not have the authority to tell school principals and family engagement liaisons what to do. In other words, Ingrid suggested that the Office of Community Engagement

had authority over principals within the Yorbas Unified School District. Ingrid also implied that only the school district executive leadership should be delegating tasks and assignments to school principals. Ingrid mentioned that her communication protocol also addressed a concern over the union potentially raising a red flag if word got out that school staff was being told what to do by parents and external organizations. In summary, Ingrid suggested that her new leadership role and communication protocol helped repair this tension and brought the school principals and family engagement liaisons onboard with the YELI family-school partnership:

...but here's the problem, they hadn't had a leader [referring to herself as the new leader], those YELI schools didn't know what the expectation was, right, we hadn't set, and it was going back to our purpose and what the purpose of this group is...we are bringing in all new parents, all new family engagement liaisons, we're bringing in new principals, and none of them have a history, none of them have the context with what YELI is about like me...since then principals have changed...it was harder for people to kind of buy in, right, but we never like really stop to re-establish a purpose with them, or to get the new principals to understand, or the new family engagement liaisons, so that's where I feel some of those things that have kind of gone wrong, and since I started this position...no one ever told them from the beginning what their role was in this system, but once they know, when they know the value of it. I mean you saw how great the family engagement liaisons were at each table interacting with the parents. (Interview with Ingrid, December 2022)

Ingrid's new communication protocol created a process where any formal requests of school principals and family engagement liaisons would need to be reviewed and approved by the Office of Family Engagement. Ingrid argued that her Office of Family Engagement had the hierarchical authority and power to delegate and require school principals and family engagement liaisons to engage with the partnership. She stated:

...it should come from me, it should come from me, because honestly, I'm their boss right, and not that there's a hierarchy in that, but when an outside organization is telling people to do something, it could come back and bite us, and it could hurt us as an organization, right, because then they go to the union, and then they say, 'Why is this happening?' ... let me approach it and say to the school principals and family engagement liaisons, this is the support I need from you, this is the expectation, this is what we're going to do, and this is why we're doing it, you guys. Just know it's a great organization, your parents are going to get amazing trainings and leadership, and you're

going to empower your parents and your parents love this, right. (Interview with Ingrid, December 2022)

While Ingrid suggests that the communication protocol helped repair the tension with the new school principals, the enacted response strategy conformed to the conventional and dominant school-centric logics that undermine equitable collaboration. The enacted response strategy demonstrated the asymmetrical power that school leaders unconsciously activate to address issues and barriers with family-school relations. Moreover, the enacted communication protocol is an example of the conventional, normative, and dominant school-centric approaches that schools partake in when collaborating with nondominant parents and families. In particular, the enacted communication protocol empowered the school district's Office of Family Engagement to shape and determine how school principals and family engagement liaisons will engage with the YELI family-school partnership. In this case, Ingrid was supportive of the YELI family-school partnership, however, this communication protocol re-centralized this engagement within the school district's power to determine if and how school principals and family engagement liaisons engage with parents and the community. Put differently, by imposing a solution that re-centered power within the school district, the enacted response strategy indirectly undermined the intent of fostering more equitable approaches for collaboration.

Although the intent of the communication protocol was to repair the tension and ensure school principals and family engagement liaisons engaged in the partnership, the consequence of this strategy created an environment where the school district could disproportionately influence the strategic direction of the YELI family-school partnership. Using Solorzano and Bernal's (2001) transformational resistance lens in tandem with Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration framework to examine the enacted response to this tension helps explain how the communication protocol was a strategy that conformed to a dominant status quo that continued centering school

leaders as the experts of family-school relations, while inadvertently, through a deficit-oriented lens, minimizing the voices, knowledge, and expertise of nondominant parents, families, and external community-based organizations. Importantly, this response strategy was propelled by Ingrid's desire for equitable collaboration, but reinforced a structure that historically has undercut the voices, experiences, and expertise of parents, families and community leaders.

#### **Tension #4: Lack of Capacity to Design Parent Leadership Development Curriculum**

On Friday, February 24, 2023, the YELI family-school partnership hosted its second of five-parent leadership capacity-building training sessions. The purpose of the program was to strengthen parents' and caregivers' leadership skills to ensure the optimal level of support for families with children ages 0 to 9 in helping their children reach their full potential. Through this leadership development program, parents would develop a plan for designing or redesigning Wellness Centers at their school or neighborhood level that addresses the needs of families with children ages 0 to 9. On this Friday morning, more than 200 parents were in attendance, sitting together in large round tables with parents whose children attended the same elementary school. Several school principals and family engagement liaisons were also in attendance and sitting in their corresponding tables with parents. The agenda for this second session focused on the following learning objectives: 1) helping parents learn more about the importance of early childhood education, 2) understanding key early childhood development milestones, and 3) connecting families to formal and informal resources. In terms of process, the session consisted of two presentations followed by facilitated discussions at the table level.

However, during the second half of the session, I noticed many parents were not engaging in the topic of discussion or responding to the questions displayed on the projector. I also learned that Armando was frustrated with how the second half of the session was being

facilitated. Particularly, Dr. Jessica, an assistant professor from Cal State Yorbas, who was conducting research using the Early Development Index (EDI), presented a brief overview of the EDI and instructed parents to write down any questions or concerns they had with the Early Development Index. In my reflection, I noted the presentation was very short, and wondered if Dr. Jessica was rushing and had to reduce or skip over important information to share specific data. After observing the side conversations at several tables, I walked back to the table in the back of the room and sat down next to Armando. He leaned over and shared that what was happening was the result of his decision to step back from managing and facilitating the parent leadership development program. Armando walked to the front of the room, pick up the microphone that was resting in the podium, and begin re-explaining the purpose of the EDI, how the EDI tool measures kindergarten student performance across key areas, and how the EDI tool would inform the YELI family-school partnership's development of strategies to improve early education outcomes. Armando stated:

Original Quote in Spanish: ...Nosotros tenemos esos datos de este último año académico, del 2021 al 2022, por escuela, entonces nosotros lo que queremos hacer es mostrarles los datos de los niños del kínder por escuela, hoy no lo vamos a hacer, pero queremos que entiendan, que se comuniquen, que tenemos un instrumento que capta como van los niños del kínder en su escuela, vamos bien? Entonces lo que queremos ahorita es simplemente, en esas hojas que ven allá, en lo que están ahorita anotando, si tienen ustedes algunas preguntas de cada una de las áreas, entonces, que abarca la salud física y el bien estar, si ya está claro para ustedes, entonces no hagan ninguna pregunta, pero si tienen alguna pregunta sobre, por ejemplo, que incluye la madurez emocional, entonces hagan sus preguntas, porque esas preguntas nosotros queremos contestarlas en la siguiente sesión, vamos bien, porque lo que ustedes van a ver con los datos es como vamos ahorita de acuerdo al último año escolar, porque si queremos mejorar la educación temprana, tenemos que ver donde estamos, vamos bien, okay, ahorita simplemente si tienen preguntas sobre cada una de estas áreas, hagan la pregunta y así en la sesión siguiente se las vamos a contestar, y de esa manera cuando ustedes vean los datos, van a ver como le va a cada escuela, en cada una de estas áreas para los niños del kínder. (24 de febrero del 2023)

English translation: ...We have the data from this last academic year, from 2021 to 2022, by school, so what we want to do is show you the data of kindergarten children

by school, today we are not going to do it, but we want you to understand, that it be communicated, that we have an instrument that captures how the kindergarten students are doing in their school, does that make sense? So what we want right now is simply, in those sheets that you see there, in what you are writing down right now, if you have some questions about each of the areas, such as what is included in physical health and well-being. If it's already clear for you, then don't ask any questions. But if you have any questions about, for example, what is meant by emotional maturity, then ask your questions, because we want to answer those questions in the next session. Does that make sense, because what you are going to be seeing with the data is how we are doing right now according to the last school year, because if we want to improve early education, we have to see where we are, does that make sense. Okay, right now if you have questions about each of these areas, ask the question so that in the next session we are going to answer them, and that way when you see the data, you will see how each school is doing in each of these areas for the kindergarten students. (February 24, 2023)

After Armando finished his explanation, I observed more parents writing down questions on post-it notes and sticking them to flip charts on the side of the room. The session adjourned shortly afterward, and Armando extended an invitation for me to observe a debrief where he, along with Gloria, Sofia, Ingrid, and Renata would discuss and reflect on what worked well and areas for improvement with respect to the parent leadership training curriculum. Recognizing the emerging tension with the design and implementation of the parent leadership training session, I approached the debrief as a unique opportunity to observe and document the enacted response to resolve the tension.

### ***The Debrief***

The debrief began with a discussion about the parent registration process, which was causing logistical issues with transportation, food, and child care for the parent leadership training sessions. Specifically, there were two registration lists with different records of which parents would be transported on school buses to the Esqueda Center where the parent leadership training sessions were held. This issue occurred because there were divergent parent registration processes used by the school district and the YELI backbone agency. As this conversation

ensued, I noted how Armando appeared to not be particularly interested in addressing this tension based on his multiple attempts to bring closure to the emerging issue by emphasizing the need to address this issue on a separate date. Yet, Gloria, Sofia, Ingrid, and Renata were not on the same page as Armando, and they continued the conversation, justifying their contrasting methods and approaches with the registration process, trying to convince each other that one method was better than the other. I noted how the tense discussion about the parent registration process suggested a broader underlying tension between the school district team and the YELI backbone agency. Still, instead of taking time to unpack and attempt to address the issue, Armando maintained that the issue needed to be resolved on a different date and time.

Later, the discussion shifted to the parent leadership curriculum. However, instead of directly sharing his concern with the parent leadership session, Armando began sharing his understanding of the purpose of the parent leadership training, and asked if others had a similar understanding. After confirming that everyone had a similar understanding of the purpose, Armando described his concern with the slippage in learning. The following audio recording transcript narrates how the discussion unfolded in the debrief, and how the tension with the parent leadership training curriculum was addressed.

***Transcription of Audio Recording*** (Friday, February 24, 2023)

Armando: “With respect to the content and what was achieved today, and where we want to go, right, you all have been more in the planning than I have, so my understanding is that we want to make sure that the parents have a deep understanding of the five domains that are part of the Early Development Index, and with a deep understanding...they would use that along with their talents and resources we are harvesting to at least do two things, one is to figure out how they would mobilize the resources of parents to advance the readiness of the children in those domains, and the other one is to figure out what kinds of resources are needed that can be mobilized around the Wellness Centers to support families in their attempt to advance the development of their children in those five domains. Let me affirm the assumption that I am making, is that what we are doing? (The group affirmed and there was laughter). So I am going to spare you all from all the compliments, you all put it all together and everything, and I

am going to jump into where I think there may be some slippage in terms of learning, in other words, where I don't think there was enough traction at the table level learning around the EDI, and let me know if it's just me or if you also saw it? I think some parents got a general gist of, yeah, a child needs to develop across all these areas, at the same time, I don't think the presentation that was given today, the table participants didn't get a chance to digest that at the table level..."

Renata: "...in order to generate questions and thoughts about the next steps."

Armando: "Right, would you agree with that?"

Renata: "That was my feeling, in my teacher's head, oh we went all the way to independent work time without the scaffold, and I think there was interest in it, they were ready for it, but there wasn't a bridge."

Ingrid: "I think it was also a time issue too, Armando, because we had talked about this, this takes a lot of time, it's almost like it has to be small digestible chunks...there needed to be more interaction so we could also see, like does everyone understand what each of the five areas is, and even saying how were the kids questioned, because that is what the group brought up, how do they know that they are emotionally mature, like the teachers are marking down based off of what...and how do you know that they reached that level...is there a rubric that determines that level of maturity...I felt like EDI could have been the whole time broken down into the five areas in chunks, and really processing, and I think we had done that in the past, and we made the same mistakes where we did too much at once..."

Sofia: "So the piece that I am going to discuss is we did have a group activity on the table that was about 20 minutes but we kind of got sabotaged, and so we kind of..."

Armando: "What happened that sabotaged it?"

Sofia: "So we didn't have the time, so we were like, look, we are running behind, and in order to get this stuff we kind of have to, and Jessica was like 'just remove the group activity' and I'm like 'okay.' The other piece is that we are doing that, the next session we are going to only focus on one domain, and really have it build that way and that's how we are developing the curriculum, working through each domain, this was more of an overview and we really, at least for me, the reason why we did that, we really did want to hear those questions, so when parents were like 'que es esto' (what is that?), I'm like, 'write it down and put it on the wall,' because that's going to help us in the planning and figure out where we really need to focus and what we need to do, so at least, for me, I do know what you were saying, because I do believe we needed that group activity, but I think Jessica again, to save us from time, because her presentation was supposed to be one hour or more, so it really got cut down..."

Ingrid: “And for mine, I was trying to rush through the intro, the ‘get to know you’ activity, I don’t know if you could tell, I was scrambling because I knew we had lots of things on the table.”

Armando: “...so for example, I don’t think anybody should be presenting in English with chunked presentations in Spanish, all the presentations need to be in Spanish, period, Katie could have chosen someone else to do it in Spanish, because those things take twice the amount, right...that’s the suggestion...so moving forward...we have basically three more sessions, it helps to know what you are planning was more of an orientation, so for the third session, what were you planning do, and then the fourth and fifth session?”

Gloria: “So the third session is going to be around social and emotional development.”

Armando: “So just social and emotional. What about the fourth?”

Gloria: “It’s healthy context and nutrition.”

Armando: “And then the fifth?”

Gloria: “And the fifth is, we will just have the planning with them, we are only touching three domains of the EDI.”

Armando: “Okay, a concern I have is that the EDI domain that is the lowest scores across the board is language, literacy, and cognitive development...”

Gloria: “We can do that for the fifth session...”

Armando: “I would suggest we move that to the top...”

Renata: “I think that should be number one.”

Armando: “Yeah.”

Renata: “And...and you can take me off, but I think, which is fine because there is work happening around this...I think you get the most bang for your buck by starting here.”

Armando: “So it’s the language and cognitive development and communication and general knowledge...and to make it easier, I would almost like, I don’t know if you would be willing or a team, like you don’t have to go through the planning committee on the content, just to say, we really need to focus on language and cognitive development, communication and general knowledge, the part that I just don’t want the planning committee to do is, I don’t know what the skills sets are of the planning committee in terms of designing a learning activity, does that make sense?”

Gloria: “Well to be honest, the planning committee is all of us.”

Armando: “This is just me suggesting but okay then, if we have the expertise, if Renata, if you’re willing to have a team develop this...”

This transcript highlights how the enacted response strategy to address the tension gradually drifted toward a school-centric logic underlined by a normative and dominant assumption that formal school leaders possess the educational and technical expertise to design effective parent leadership curriculum. Analysis of the debrief also revealed how asymmetrical power and gender dynamics influenced and shaped the enacted response strategy. In short, Armando’s recommendation that Renata—from the school district—should lead the design of the parent leadership training curriculum, conforms to the conventional, dominant, and school-centric approaches for collaboration, whereby the educational and technical expertise of formal school district leaders is valued over that of family and community leaders.

Throughout the debrief, I noted that Renata was the only one who agreed with Armando’s observations and suggestions. For example, when Armando asked if others acknowledged the slippage in learning, Renata shared that she observed the lack of a scaffold or bridge between the presentation and individual-level work at the tables. In contrast, Gloria, Sofia, and Ingrid challenged Armando’s critique, arguing that the ‘slippage in learning’ was the result of the agenda being ‘sabotaged’ by one English-speaking presenter taking longer than planned, due to the need for consecutive Spanish interpretation. Moreover, Sofia described how the session’s objectives were still met, in light of the ‘sabotage,’ since the intent of the final agenda item was to briefly introduce and orient the parents to the Early Development Index, while offering them the opportunity to ask clarifying questions that may inform the design of the following session. Armando acknowledged the group’s insistence that the issue was about the agenda being sabotaged, and offered the recommendation that only Spanish-speaking presenters

should be invited to present at the parent leadership training. I noted that a Spanish-English interpreter was hired to provide interpretation for a small group of monolingual English speakers, but there was not enough interpretation equipment for everyone at the parent leadership training session.

After this portion of the discussion, Armando asked Gloria to share the preliminary agenda for the next three parent leadership sessions. In response, Gloria shared that the curriculum would go in depth on three out of the five EDI domains, which consisted of physical health, social competence, and emotional maturity. After hearing this, Armando questioned why the two lowest performing domains were excluded from the curriculum. These EDI were language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge. Renata, again, agreed with Armando and suggested the need to prioritize these two EDI domains in the curriculum. Gloria, Renata, and Ingrid's silence during this part of the debrief may have been interpreted as agreement by Armando.

Next, Armando asserted that the planning committee did not have the capacity to design learning activities and insinuated that Renata should take the lead with the curriculum. In response to Armando's assertion, Gloria argued that the planning committee involved Sofia, Ingrid, and Renata, and thus implied that since Renata is a part of the planning committee, the body did have capacity based on Armando's rationale. Still, in response, Armando stressed that he was only making a suggestion, but maintained that the curriculum needed to shift, and that Renata should play a lead role in the design of the learning activities.

With the group nodding in approval, the conversation shifted, and the group began discussing the agenda for the upcoming parent leadership training session in March 2023. Armando articulated the importance of sharing specific EDI school-level data to help parents

understand how their schools are performing, and help parents shape the types of services needed at their school's wellness center. Gloria and Sofia then pushed back on the recommendation to share EDI data with parents, arguing that sharing school-site level data may not be a best practice. In response, Armando asked Gloria and Sofia to elaborate and explain how the sharing of school-site level data was not a best practice. Thus, Sofia mentioned that First 5 Yorbas, a key funder of the YELI family-school partnership, had expressed concerns with sharing specific school-site level EDI data due to the possibility it may lead to parents unfairly comparing schools. In response, Armando argued that they did not need permission from First 5 Yorbas to share the EDI data. Armando asserted that the EDI data was owned by the school district and YELI family-school partnership. Again, Gloria and Sofia nodded as to signal they agreed with Armando's rationale, and the meeting adjourned.

### ***Conforming to a School-Centric Paradigm***

The debrief meeting exemplifies how asymmetrical power and gender dynamics between community and school system leaders permeate within collaborative spaces. In this example, the debrief illustrates how response strategies conform with a dominant school-centric paradigm that values the educational and technical expertise of school system leaders over community-based leaders. Armando's position as a governing board member of the Yorbas Unified School District, founder of the YELI family-school partnership, experience as a professional facilitator, and gender identity as a Latino male in a group primarily comprised of Latina women, plays a key role in shaping the conversation that took place in the debrief.

For example, Armando's effort to create a safe learning space for reflective practice quickly transformed into a contested space where Gloria and Sofia pushed back and resisted the portrayed observations, opinions, and recommendations offered by Armando, Ingrid, and Renata.

Not only was Armando situated in a position of power, but he also influenced and shaped the conversation through his facilitation approach. Particularly, Armando minimized the parent registration issue, asserting that the issue should be resolved on another date. Yet, despite the group's evident desire to address the parent registration issue, Armando insisted that the concern needed to be addressed on a different date, and this assertion enabled Armando to shift the focus of the conversation to the tension with the parent leadership curriculum.

The next phase of the conversation was replete with oppositional viewpoints about what transpired and contributed to Armando's observation of a 'slippage of learning.' After probing through a series of questions for Gloria and Sofia, Armando asserted that the planning committee did not have the capacity to design parent leadership learning activities, and suggested that Renata—the school district's director of elementary education with decades of experience as a teacher and principal, but with no experience with parent leadership development and capacity building programs—should lead the design of parent leadership learning activities moving forward. Notwithstanding Renata's lack of experience developing and implementing community-based parent leadership and capacity-building programs, Armando's recommendation implied that Renata's educational and technical expertise was valued over that of Gloria and Sofia's.

Gloria challenged Armando's claim by highlighting that both Ingrid and Renata were on the planning committee, insinuating that if the planning committee does not have the capacity, neither does Renata. The recommendation that Renata take the lead to design parent leadership learning activities was the enacted response to address the tense and contested space that unfolded through the debrief meeting. Albeit Renata was the only one to consistently agree with Armando throughout the debrief, the enacted response did not appear to be based on Renata's experience with parent leadership and capacity-building programs. Instead, the enacted response

strategy highlights how Renata's educational and technical expertise and experience was implicitly valued over Gloria and Sofia's. Moreover, this enacted response highlights how tensions can create sensitive conditions where individuals, who may be trying to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration, implicitly reinforce normative school-centric logics and deficit-oriented perspectives that undermine equitable collaboration. This debrief provides another example of how response strategies can undermine equitable collaboration by conforming to the conventional, dominant, and school-centric paradigms concerning whose knowledge, expertise, and competence is tacitly respected.

### **Conclusion: The School-Centric Reflex**

The school-centric reflex was a common thread across the two conformist strategies in this chapter, with both examples illuminating the ways a school-centric logic shaped the solution to the respective tensions. Put differently, the two enacted response strategies conformed to a normative, dominant, and school-centered paradigm that situated educators and school leaders as experts, while perceiving parents and the external community-based organizations through a deficit-oriented lens that implicitly labeled them as incompetent. In the first example, Ingrid, who was in a position of power as the school district's director of family engagement, responded to the tension by establishing a school-centered communication protocol. The purpose of the newly created 'efficient' communication protocol was to rectify the tension brewing between parents, the backbone agency, and school principals. However, instead of co-designing a communication structure built on the assets, needs, and cultural wealth of parents and community leaders, Ingrid described the need to streamline communication with principals, which positioned Ingrid and her Office of Family Engagement, as the point of contact for all communication related to the YELI family-school partnership.

The enacted response strategy to address the tension with the parent leadership development curriculum illuminated how school-centric logic implicitly shaped the solution that overvalued the educational and technical expertise of Renata due to her role and experience as a leader within the school district. Yet, Renata had no direct experience designing community-based leadership development and capacity-building curriculum. And, instead of highlighting the planning committee's need for capacity building, the recommendation to have a school district leader take the lead conformed to an underlying school-centric reflex that manifested in the heated and contested debrief. In summary, this chapter explored how a school-centric reflex asserted itself in efforts to address tension within the YELI family-school partnership. Specifically, the school-centric logics asserted themselves within the enacted response strategies, which—I argued—ultimately limited the ability to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration.

## **Chapter 6: Resisting the School-Centric Paradigm**

In this findings chapter, I examine three transformational response strategies that fostered more equitable approaches for collaboration. Particularly, I describe how resistance to conventional power asymmetries and the desire to center parents as educational leaders transformed the YELI family-school partnership towards a more equitable collaboration. I argue that these response strategies transformed the partnership from school-centric to community-centered approaches of collaboration. Specifically, this chapter examines the enacted response strategies to address the tension with the inclusion and exclusion of parents, the tension with the Wellness Centers, and the tension with the community-schools initiative.

### **Tension #1: Parent Inclusion by Exclusion**

In late fall of 2017, when the schools joined the [early childhood education initiative], a number of organizations said we should bring in parents, and I remember the principals saying, ‘no, we do not want to bring in parents because we do not know yet what this is about, we want to know what this is about first, let’s get our act together first, and see what we want to do. (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

In this first section, I explore how the community organizations’ resistance to excluding parents led to a transformative strategy to foster more equitable collaboration in YELI family-school partnership. The parent inclusion-exclusion tension surfaced after community-based organizations resisted the lack of parent involvement in the early and formative phase of the YELI family-school partnership. In response to this resistance, the founder and school district leaders developed a comprehensive approach focused on centering parent leadership within the YELI family-school partnership. Central characters in this tension included Armando (founder), Ingrid (principal, school district), and Maria Cruz (executive director, community-based organization). In the following paragraphs, I describe how the parent inclusion-exclusion tension

emerged, who was involved, and more importantly, how the enacted response strategy fostered an equitable approach for collaboration.

### ***Rationalizing Parent Exclusion***

By the fall of 2017, an emerging group of organizations and school district representatives, which by that time had met for months to explore the opportunity for collective impact, decided to take their ‘learning community’ to the next phase, and identify specific goals, objectives, and strategies for action. Concurrently, several organizations, such as Familias Fuertes, began raising concerns and pushing back on the lack of parents involved in the learning community. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Maria Cruz, the executive director of Familias Fuertes, believed that the exclusion of parents would undermine the success of the early childhood education initiative. She stated:

I think the only part that was missing, and that was probably one of the challenges that I struggled with, I mean my organization is called ‘Familias Fuertes’ (Strong Families), and there weren’t any parents or families, which I remember sitting with Armando and saying, okay, so when are we bringing the parents in? Like that’s who should be here more so than anything else. (Interview with Maria Cruz, February 2023)

The organizations’ pushback was felt and heard by Ingrid, who was startled by the resistance:

...the group was taken aback, I remember that I felt like people were kind of like, “Well Ingrid, if we are about parents, how do we not bring parents in?” I had some pushback...” (Interview with Ingrid, December 2022)

Armando shared that school principals did not want to involve parents until the existing group of the partnership’s members had built a shared understanding of the initiative’s vision, goals, strategies, and the respective roles. Armando stated:

In late fall of 2017, when the schools joined YELI, a number of organizations said we should bring in parents, and I remember the principals saying, “No, we do not want to bring in parents because we do not know yet what this is about. We want to know what this is about first, let’s get our act together first, and see what we want to do.” (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

On one side, school principals argued that the broader group needed to get their act together before involving parents. Ingrid stated:

...it was we didn't have a clear vision, and if we don't have a clear vision, right, as a group of organizations, if we're not prepared, we're inviting parents in to like a chaotic kind of mess at that point, right? We were kind of everywhere, and I was like, 'we're not ready yet, Armando.' We are not ready yet, I said, we need to make it very clear. So when parents come in, we've established who we want to be...we have a system for really hearing their voices, we have a process and protocols for what their needs are, we know where parents are to start with, we know what assets they're already coming with... (Interview with Ingrid, January 2023)

Maria Cruz reiterated how Armando emphasized the need for the organizations and school district to get onboard with the initiative before involving parents:

...but Armando is like, 'well before we bring the parents into this big chaos, we have to get together, on board on what the idea is, and where we are headed, which made sense, right, logistically, administratively. I think it made sense that all these different components, who were moving in opposite directions first needed to kind of at least make sure they fit in the right ridges or leave if they didn't, you know, right because there were some that just it wasn't a fit, it was not going to fit for them, or it was not going to fit for us, which I think was Armando's vision and his wisdom. He's like, let's get our shit together before we bring in the parents, who will really take this off, so that was his response more or less. (Interview with Maria Cruz. February 2023)

Overall, the rationale to hold off on involving parents was referenced in several interviews, including an interview with the program officer, Sarah, from the funding agency. Sarah echoed this rationale by explaining that the school district and organizations wanted to spend time understanding the purpose and direction of the early learning initiative before bringing in parents. She stated:

...the work was being done mostly amongst the school district and resource providers, really trying to understand looking at data and looking at the economic impact in the different communities in the city, and they were super thoughtful about where they wanted to go with this before they brought parents on. (Interview with Sarah, October 2022)

### ***Building the Infrastructure***

After going back and forth on whether to involve parents, the group formally decided to temporarily exclude parents while the existing group of partners clarified the vision, goals, objectives, and the theory of change. The group engaged in a goal-setting process that focused on developing collective goals, metrics, benchmarks. By Fall 2017, the group had developed a data-driven outcomes dashboard using the Early Development Instrument. Figure 2 and 3 illustrate a draft of the five-year goals and outcome dashboard.

**Figure 2.**

*YELI School-Community Partnership Dashboard, Five-Year Goals*

Areas	Preschool: 3-4 Years Old	Kindergarten: 5 Years Old	Third Grade: 8 Years Old	Fourth Grade: 9 Years Old
Social-Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #1:</b> Approaches to learning (self-regulation). (Goal TBD)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #2:</b> 75% of kindergarten students are ready in approaches to learning.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #3:</b> 75% 4<sup>th</sup> grade students with a growth mindset.</li> </ul>
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #4:</b> 75% 4<sup>th</sup> grade students with self-management.</li> </ul>
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #5:</b> 85% 4<sup>th</sup> grade students with a sense of belonging (school connectedness).</li> </ul>
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #6:</b> 75% of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students who feel safe at school.</li> </ul>
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #7:</b> Language and literacy development. (Goal TBD)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #8:</b> 85% kindergarten students ready in basic literacy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #10:</b> 45% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students meet or exceed standards in ELA.</li> </ul>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #9:</b> 51% kindergarten students ready in general communication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #11:</b> 75% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students meet or exceed their growth projections in reading.</li> </ul>	
Math	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #12:</b> Cognition, including math and science. (Goal TBD)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #13:</b> 85% kindergarten students ready in basic numeracy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #14:</b> 51% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students meet or exceed standards in math.</li> </ul>	
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Measure #15:</b> 75% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students meet or exceed their growth projections in math.</li> </ul>	

Figure 3.

*YELI School-Community Partnership Dashboard, Five Year Goals by Outcome Areas and Grade/Age*

Area	Measures	Baseline: 2016	Target: 2019	Goal: 2021	Assessment
Social-Emotional	1. Approaches to learning (self-regulation).	TBD	TBD	TBD	DRDP
	2. Approaches to learning.	53%	62%	75%	EDI
	3. % of 4 <sup>th</sup> grade students with a growth mindset.	51%	65%	75%	CHKS
	4. % of 4 <sup>th</sup> grade students with self-management skills.	63%	70%	75%	CHKS
	5. % of 4 <sup>th</sup> grade students with a sense of belonging (school connectedness).	78%	80%	85%	CHKS
	6. % of 4 <sup>th</sup> grade students who feel safe at school.	55%	65%	75%	CHKS
Language	7. Language and literacy development.	TBD	TBD	TBD	DRDP
	8. % of kindergarten students ready in basic literacy.	67%	75%	85%	EDI
	9. % of kindergarten students ready in general knowledge and communication.	30%	40%	51%	EDI
	10. % of 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade students meet or exceed standards in English Language Arts.	22%	35%	45%	SBAC
	11. % of 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade students meet or exceed their growth projections in reading.	54%	65%	75%	MAP
Math	12. Cognition, including math and science.	TBD	TBD	TBD	DRDP
	13. % of kindergarten students ready in basic numeracy.	73%	80%	85%	EDI
	14. % of 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade students meet or exceed standards in math.	30%	40%	51%	SBAC
	15. % of 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade students meet or exceed their growth projections in math.	56%	65%	75%	MAP

Through the goal-setting process, the partnership formed a theory of change that focused on improving the alignment and integration of systems, services, and resources for successful student outcomes; and specifically building parent leadership capacity. According to Armando, the theory of change helped the learning community acknowledge the importance of parent leadership for the success of the emerging early learning initiative.

After developing the data-driven outcomes dashboard, and theory of change, however, the group of partners did not immediately begin involving parents. Rather, the group developed a strategic approach for parent involvement. First, a landscape analysis was conducted to map out and identify the group's collective parent engagement strengths, gaps, and opportunities to inform a strategic plan moving forward. The landscape analysis highlighted that more than 40

organizations, including the school district, provided parents and families with an abundance of opportunities to engage in different types of activities, events, resources, and programming. Yet, the landscape analysis also revealed the need to improve alignment and coordination of the numerous parent and family engagement opportunities. For example, although there was an abundance of parent engagement opportunities, the opportunities existed in silos, and parents involved in one program were largely unaware of other opportunities. The landscape analysis suggested that the existing organizational networks were fragmented and that made it challenging for parents to connect across multiple opportunities. Table 2 provides a summary of the challenges and opportunities in the landscape analysis.

**Table 2.**

***Parent Engagement Landscape Analysis***

After mapping out programs, participants offered reflections on challenges and opportunities in harnessing these resources to support the establishment of an active network of parents, caregivers, and other stakeholders who will advance early learning outcomes at the neighborhood level.

- a. There seems to be too many resources and it feels overwhelming.
- b. There seems to be a duplication of services, additional forms to fill out, and no streamlined process to access resources.
- c. It is not clear who can access services and what is offered.
- d. There seem to be silos across these programs, with limited information and thus lack of access.
- e. It is challenging for parents, caregivers, and other interested stakeholders to obtain information about these programs.
- f. It is difficult for parents, caregivers, and other interested stakeholders to know about and to plug into leadership development opportunities.
- g. There is not a clear leadership development/empowerment continuum of support that helps a person go from 'crisis' to 'leadership' (i.e., the empowerment process).
- h. The financial sustainability of this network of resources is not clear and/or not strong.
- i. It is unclear what the cost is to participate in these programs.

- j. It is not clear how the people gain access to these services from a geographical standpoint: where are these programs regionally concentrated and there's probably a transportation issue.
- k. It takes time and personal resources to find out about programs and follow up.
- l. It is not clear how we connect, link, and follow up with parents regarding each other's organizations and programs.
- m. Too many resources.

1. There is a sense of timeliness, urgency, and responsiveness in this group to harness these resources to support parents.
2. There seem to be resources that support parent and resident leadership.
3. There is an opportunity get agencies and people to start communicating and aligning parent leadership programs and other services.
4. This is a good time to use research-based practices in terms of programs.
5. The resources are diverse and not a one-size-fits-all variety.
6. Many of these resources are in [organization's] list, which can serve to connect community to resources.
7. There is a vast menu of resources, so we can focus on how to make the resources more accessible.
8. This is a good time to identify not only what we have, but also what is missing. What are the gaps? Who is in most need? How do we identify families to connect to services?
9. We have an opportunity to build a continuum of support for families.
10. We can work on making it easy for parents to know/find out where to plug into leadership opportunities.
11. We need to place these services into different categories (to make them more accessible): parenting, parent education, parent/resident leadership, and family support.

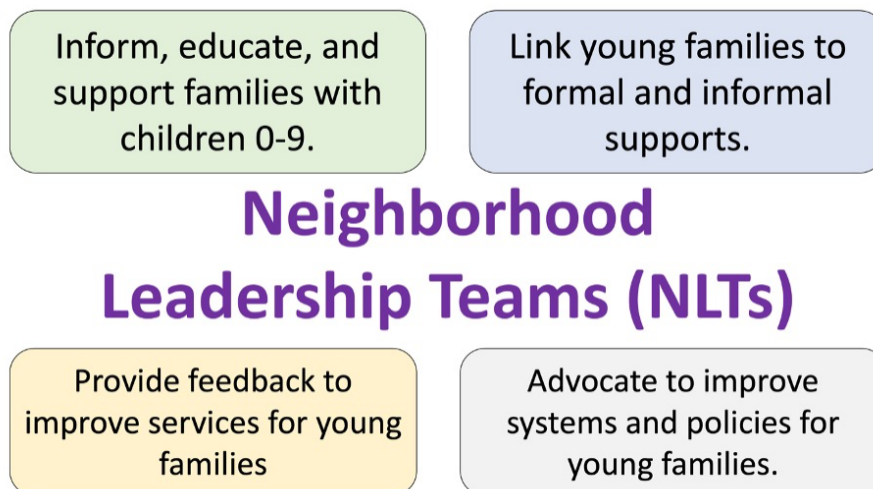
According to Armando, the landscape analysis led to an insight and subsequent development of a comprehensive parent leadership development trajectory that would build and strengthen parent leadership skills and competencies, and mobilize parent leaders to engage in specific community-based projects and address community needs and priorities. He stated:

In Spring 2018, right before we got the parents involved, we did a landscape analysis as a full group, we did a mind map of what was working well and not working well with parent engagement, and if we are going to move forward, what are we going to do? And one of the things that came out of that conversation, all these organizations are doing parent engagement of some type, but our parent engagement is really disconnected, so a parent who is involved in one organization does not know there are other things happening elsewhere. Organizations are playing a gatekeeping role, secondly parents do not have access to a developmental trajectory of support, basically their leadership development depends on what an organization can do, versus creating...the idea was why don't we come together as

organizations. We co-craft a leadership development experience that is grounded in parenting but goes beyond that, where we as organizations collaborate and co-design and deliver the trainings but also recruit parents. (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

The emerging partnership spent the Spring of 2018 designing the parent leadership development program. While the emerging partners were designing the parent leadership curriculum, the Yorbas Unified School District was preparing to open Wellness Centers at elementary schools for the upcoming 2018-2019 school year. The upcoming opening of Wellness Centers was seen as an opportunity to align the parent leadership program with a real and meaningful project. In particular, the curriculum would involve parents conducting a neighborhood needs assessment and creating a shared vision of how their respective school's Wellness Centers may address the needs of students, families, and the broader neighborhood. The school district described the Wellness Centers as a "hub where parents, family, staff, and community partners can collaborate and engage in meaningful interactions, sharing information, and experiences with each other to benefit students, the school, and the entire community" (Source: Yorbas Unified School District Website).

To build on this opportunity with the Wellness Centers, the parent leadership curriculum also included the development of parent-led Neighborhood Leadership Teams (NLTs). The purpose of the NLTs was to mobilize parents in their own neighborhoods to inform, educate, and support families with children 0 to 9 years old, link young families to formal and informal supports, provide feedback to improve services for young families, and advocate to improve systems and policies for young families. Figure 4 below illustrates the four objectives of the Neighborhood Leadership Teams.

**Figure 4.*****Neighborhood Leadership Team***

According to Armando, the parent-led NLTs would help bring together parent leaders and the school district's family engagement liaisons, who would staff the upcoming Wellness Centers, to work collaboratively to meet the needs of students, families, and the broader neighborhood community.

By Summer 2018, the YELI family-school partnership began outreaching to parents and inviting them to attend parent summits. Parent summits were organized and hosted by the YELI family-school partnership, and they were held at several elementary schools. The parent summits focused on helping parents understand how students and schools were performing across early learning measures, hoping that this information would motivate parents to commit to participating in the six-month parent leadership development program. By the fall of 2018, more than 100 parents across 13 elementary schools registered and participated in the parent leadership development program. On December 14, 2018, the parent leadership program cohort presented their visions of how each elementary school's Wellness Centers would serve the needs



elevating the significance of family-school partnership leaders investing time in the development of the strategic and collaborative structures and processes required to center parents as educational leaders (Ishimaru, 2020). Although the community-based organizations wanted parents involved from the beginning, the rationale at the root of enacted response strategy fostered a shared understanding of the importance of investing time to sow the buy-in and commitment from organizations and the school district, which was understood as a necessary step to meaningfully cultivate the collaborative systems and processes to authentically center parents as educational leaders. Ironically, the rationale to temporarily exclude parents was in response to the long history of conventional, dominant, and deficit-oriented school-centric family-school relations that undervalue parents, families, and community funds of knowledge (Moll, et. al., 1992). The rationale implied that by inviting parents in the early stages, when there was still no shared buy-in and commitment by the organizations and the school district, not only risked the opportunity for the emerging partners to forge trust and a shared commitment to work together, but would have also exposed parents to the same type of deficit-based spaces that lacked clear roles, supports, and mechanisms to center parents as educational leaders.

Therefore, using Solorzano and Bernal's (2001) transformational resistance in tandem with Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration framework, an analysis of this enacted response strategy suggests that the exclusion of parents was propelled by an interest in addressing the long history of traditional, conventional, deficit-based, and dominant school-centric approaches with family-engagement, along with the desire to strategically cultivate the collaborative mechanisms to center parents as educational experts (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Henderson, et al., 2007; Shirley, 1997). Using this conceptual lens, I argue that the enacted response strategy produced a transformative moment for the YELI family-school partnership, as it led to a

deliberate investment and strategic plan to create an equitable family-school partnership with the mechanisms and processes to uphold the value of parents as educational experts.

Moreover, Armando argued that for the YELI family-school partnership to succeed and to improve early learning outcomes at a large scale, the emerging partnership needed to ensure and secure the buy-in and commitment from the school district. Armando argued that without the school district, the early learning initiative would be hampered by lack of support of the system and institution that is primarily responsible and accountable for student outcomes. He stated:

One of the things about collective impact framework that appeals to me is population level change, like population level results versus isolated impact, that's a really critical concept... The population level impact for me involves institutional change, so for me, in order for us to have population level impact, we have to leverage institutions that operate at a population level and the district is one of those right... so from the very beginning, one of the reasons why collective impact, I think, starts from a systems leaders perspective was, I think, they acknowledged that you need to bring the systems into the room... If you want to get to population level results, you can choose not to work with the school system but then how are you going to get the resources to really impact all the children, right. (Interview with Armando, January 2023)

According to Armando, the school district is an indispensable and critical partner for any collective impact approach to improving student outcomes at a large scale. By ensuring the school district not only bought in and committed to a shared and collective approach to improving early learning outcomes, but also supported the strategic mechanisms and processes to center parents as educational experts, I argue that the enacted response strategy helped foster a more equitable approach for collaboration.

### **Tension #2: Resisting the Mosca Muerta (Dead Fly)**

This section explores how the YELI family-school partnership responded to the school district's efforts to subvert the ability of parents and external community-based organizations to influence the school district's Wellness Centers. Specifically, I describe how school board politics and the school district's institutional and bureaucratic mechanisms undermined the YELI

family-school partnership's strategy with the Wellness Centers. More importantly, I narrate how the YELI family-school partnership resisted the school district political and bureaucratic antics by shifting their strategy from a school-centric to a community-centered paradigm. To better understand this tension and response strategy, I provide a brief overview of the Yorbas Unified School District and Yorbas Unified School Board.

***Context: Yorbas Unified School District & School Board***

The Yorbas Unified School District (YUSD) was founded in 1892 and is one of the state's largest school districts with more than 30,000 students. The school district is one of the largest employers in the city. An overwhelming majority of students qualify for free and reduced lunch and the majority are designated as low income. Approximately half of the students are classified as English learners, and nearly all students identify as Latino.

The Yorbas Unified School District Governing Board of Education is represented by five board members, publicly elected by the community, to provide leadership and oversight of the schools and operations. Similar to other governing boards, the Yorbas Board of Education works with the district's Superintendent to fulfill its major functions, including setting direction for the district, providing basic organizational structure by establishing policies, ensuring accountability of school district leaders, and providing community leadership. From 2015 through 2019, the YUSD School Board was represented by a conservative political majority. This timeline is important because it suggested that the YELI family-school partnership formed during a period of political conservatism in the school board. However, by November 2019, the political majority on the school board had shifted from conservative to progressive. Armando, the founder of the YELI family-school partnership, formed part of the new politically progressive majority on the school board.

### *A Political Divergence*

The YELI family-school partnership's intent to bring together parents and the school district's family engagement liaisons to design the Wellness Centers did not sit well with key leaders in the school district. According to Armando, the school board president wanted the Wellness Centers to serve the needs of children and their families but pushed back against the idea that the Wellness Centers should be a broader neighborhood hub or point of access for families with young children, whether or not their children were enrolled in the school. Furthermore, Armando suggested that the school board president's opposition was fundamentally the result of a political divergence between her and Armando. Armando stated:

...but that's when there was this pushback from the school board and school district, the president of the board, and they basically had control of the board, and at that time the superintendent was on the way out and from Spring 2019 through Fall 2019 the president of the school board "controlaba toda la politica" [controlled the politics]. The president and I had a divergence on what these Wellness Centers should be, my vision was those Wellness Centers should serve children and families, and not just families in the schools but also families in the neighborhood. Those Wellness Centers should be a point of access for families 0 to 3 who don't have their kids in school; they should have services there to reach out to the neighborhood. The president of the board did not have a different vision other than not wanting to implement something that was not the president's idea, something that didn't have the president's ego behind it, and at that time the director for family and community engagement and the board president aligned... (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

Armando described how the school board president wielded political power to influence her priorities, implying the existence of a political alignment between the president and key school district administrators. The strained relationship between Armando and the school board president was put on public display across several school board meetings. Maria Cruz, the executive director of Familias Fuertes, described how board members were verbally aggressive, and would often lash out, or use condescending and passive aggressive language whenever the YELI family-school partnership was highlighted in a school board meeting. She stated:

...so there were some board meetings I had to exit because of some of the just dumbass stuff that was being just tossed around, I was like, what are we 12? And I would just, you know, just some of the dynamics, I think, in one of the board meetings one of the Board members looked at [another board member] and said, “I’m a grown ass woman, don’t talk to me like I’m one of your students.” I’m like, are you fucking kidding me? You’re acting like a 12-year-old student, and just some of the stuff too, where it was, you know, some of the tone it wasn’t maybe necessarily anything they said, just the tone that was being used, kind of condescending, short, dismissive. (Interview with Maria Cruz, February 2023)

Maria Cruz described the school board’s opposition to the Wellness Centers as a political stunt to maintain their conservative majority, and explained that previously, when the conservative board members did not see the YELI family-school partnership as a threat, they would often attend the partnership meetings. However, Maria Cruz added that after the conservative board members learned more about the purpose, goals, and priorities of the YELI family-school partnership, they attempted to “punish” anyone involved or associated with the partnership. For example, she explained how the school board went after her organization’s contract with the school district:

Board members, at first, you know were attending YELI assemblies and you know, getting their face out there, oh, you know, I’m a part of this and elect me. And then once they realized that maybe they didn’t like what they were seeing, then it was I’m gonna start questioning and punishing anyone who’s involved in YELI...even my contract at some point was pulled by one of these board members, and we’ve been with the district since 1999. And one of the Board members, because Families Fuertes was a part of YELI, our contract was pulled and the question that was brought about for this was well, how does YELI fit in this? Well, nothing. This has nothing to do with YELI, this is a paid MOU that we’ve had for decades within the district. But it came up so, it was almost like because you are a part of YELI I am going to question you... (Interview with Maria Cruz, February 2023)

Ingrid, the school district’s director of family engagement, described the particular moment when “all hell broke loose” with the Wellness Centers. Specifically, Ingrid argued that the tension splintered when the school board president found out that family engagement liaisons were collaborating with the YELI family-school partnership to co-design the Wellness Centers. Ingrid stated:

...when family engagement liaisons started getting pulled into like the work of YELI and when we started designing what our Wellness Centers should look like... Well, oh my god, it was like all hell broke loose, like, why are they working on designing? The Wellness Centers should look like this, and we are working off the work from Harvard... It became very political...it was like why is YELI stepping into this work? And so that's kind of what caused that, I guess, the divide. (Interview with Ingrid, January 2023)

***The Mosca Muerta Apparatus: A Bureaucratic Mechanism to Undermine Collaboration***

The political tension between the YELI Family-School partnership and the school board resulted in the school district activating its institutional and bureaucratic mechanism to undermine the YELI family-school partnership's ability to influence design of the Wellness Centers. Armando referred to this bureaucratic mechanism as the "mosca muerta" (translation: dead fly) approach, whereby the school district engaged in specific behaviors, such as ignoring and being unresponsive to emails, messages, and phone calls, not sharing any or only sharing partial information regarding a specific policy, program, or contract requirement, and other types of behaviors that compromised the YELI family-school partnership's strategy with the Wellness Centers. Armando explained:

...and what they did was that in Spring 2019 and Fall 2019, they kept organizations from getting their memorandums of understandings approved through the district. They did it by the mosca muerta approach, 'I don't know, I don't know, but these organizations were telling me they couldn't get their stuff approved, basically, they blocked the ability to implement that strategy. (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

Sarah, a program officer with First 5 Yorbas, noticed the unusual administrative challenges that the YELI family-school partnership was dealing with to execute memorandums of understanding and contracts with the school district. Sarah stated:

There have been barriers in terms of MOUs and contracts through the district where they won't work with you if you don't have a contract, or if there's no MOUs, and then it has to go to the Board, and then there's like all the legal stuff, and so there has been barriers in that sense, and like getting the right language on the paper... (Interview with Sarah, October 2022)

Ingrid also noticed the “mosca muerta,” in describing how the school district would ‘table’ key requests from the YELI family-school partnership as a strategy to keep parents and external partners waiting, but staff would not follow up. Ingrid stated:

...they held on to the stuff and said we were going to get back to it...we kind of like tabled it, we tabled it and said we will come back to that... (Interview with Ingrid, December 2022)

Armando illustrated the different ways the “Mosca Muerta” approach affected the YELI family-school partnership, including the delay with hiring and onboarding family engagement liaisons, a new requirement that family engagement liaisons complete a two-month onboarding process before being placed at a school, risk management issues related to parent background checks and parents’ immigration status, and issues related to collective bargaining. Armando stated:

Unfortunately, we hit a bureaucratic wall throughout the latter part of the spring 2019. Basically, some (not all) family engagement liaisons were hired in Spring 2019, but they weren’t allowed to work until they completed a two-month onboarding process before being placed at a school. Some schools didn’t get a family engagement liaison because some of them decided to go elsewhere. The MOUs with organizations took so long to establish with organizations getting really frustrated with the Districtwide process. Risk management brought up the issues with the Civic Center regulations and background checks of staff. There was the problem of the [software] system, where parents without ‘documents’ couldn’t access the Wellness Centers. Then all the parents had to be always supervised while at the school, and each school dealt with this issue differently given their physical layout. Another key issue was that the family engagement liaisons were not able to refer parents to external resources. It was never clear why, but rumor had it that they couldn’t do this because their ‘job description’ did not include this activity and hence it raised ‘collective bargaining’ issues. (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

Ultimately, the effect of the school district’s “Mosca Muerta” approach resulted in the YELI family-school partnership no longer being able to achieve its objective of parent leaders co-designing the Wellness Centers.

***Swatting the Mosca: The Shift Toward a Community-Centered Strategy***

By the summer of 2019, after a considerable yet unsuccessful push to advance the strategy with the Wellness Centers, the parent leaders and community-based organizations expressed their frustrations with the YELI family-school partnership failure concerning the Wellness Centers. The expressed frustrations on behalf of parents and organizations led to a key transformational moment for the YELI family-school partnership. The partnership re-oriented from a school-centric to a community-centered strategy to meet the needs of students and families with young children. Armando explained:

...by the time we got to May/June of 2019, parents were frustrated. They said you promised us we would be able to implement our...nothing is happening, and organizations were also frustrated. So I think at that point we had some meetings with a core set of organizations, and I explained the situation. We have to rethink how we are doing this...so what we did was re-orient the work for Fall 2019 to Spring 2020. The work was re-oriented. We can't control what goes into and out of the Wellness Centers right now because I do not have the authority or power right now to do that, but what we can do is at least continue to train parents to re-conceptualize their role in their community that could have an impact on their neighborhood because we couldn't get them into their school, because of the control someone else had. (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

Thus, instead of advancing a strategy that relied on the school district's permission and support, the YELI family-school partnership shifted paradigms and adopted three community-centered strategies. First, the YELI family-school partnership decided to increase the number of parents engaged in the partnership by organizing more parent leadership trainings. Second, parent leaders focused on building trust and relationships with key elementary school principals. Third, the YELI family-school partnership formed a parent-led advocacy task force focused on addressing the needs and challenges that students and families faced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Armando explained:

...we actually built in parents into the process of co-design and co-implementation of leadership development. So the parents in the first year, some of the joined us in designing the outcomes, the training, so we thought it was a second level train-the-trainer. So we told them that what we proposed is that you get trained on how to train other

parents on early education and they bought in, and as part of that be a leader in your neighborhood. So all of Fall 2019 we dedicated ourselves to a train the trainer and their product was a curriculum. They developed their own curriculum on how they were going to train parents, on specific parenting practices for on early learning, so we pivoted to the new academic year organizing the sessions... by that time we had 13 schools, and if you saw the Esqueda Center at that time it was packed because there was 8 to 10 parents from each school showing up to Esqueda Center. One of the things I was able to at least get from the district, “Si no me van apoyar con los Wellness Centers pues” [if they are not going to support us with the wellness center, then...] at least you should pay for transportation, food, childcare, and printing costs, so they did, it was a \$50,000 commitment, I was able to get some support from the district under the radar... in terms of under the eyes of board president... (Interview with Armando, September 2022)

Sarah described the tension with the Wellness Centers as a blessing in disguise because it led to the partnership assessing and re-thinking its school-centered approach to meet the needs and challenges of families with young children in the community. This tension helped the YELI family-school partnership acknowledge the need for community-centered strategies that do not rely on institutional approval and support from the school district and school board. Sarah stated:

...It was almost like a blessing in disguise, because now they had to think differently about how to support community like there's other places you can go besides just the school, so now they've started to outreach to like, maybe apartment complexes and different places where they can reach families that aren't necessarily through the schools. (Interview with Sarah, October 2022)

Thus, by acknowledging the limitations of the school-centric strategy, the YELI family-school partnership re-oriented its approach with the Wellness Centers and decided instead to focus on bolstering its parent leadership capacity program and forming an action-oriented workgroup to address the immediate needs and challenges of families with young children during the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, the shift in strategies gave the YELI family-school partnership control over its work, instead of continuing to rely on the school district. The expressed resistance by the parents and community organizations toward the school district's control over the Wellness Centers led to an enacted response that transformed the direction of the YELI family-school partnership. Particularly, the enacted response shifted power away from the school district and

empowered the YELI family-school partnership to shape and determine which strategies to advance. According to Solorzano and Bernal (2001), this act of resistance was transformational because it was propelled by the parents and community organizations' desire to address a history of inequities disproportionately impacting early learning outcomes in Yorbas. This act of resistance was especially transformational because it led to the YELI family-school partnership retaking ownership and control over their strategies instead of relying on the school district's permission and approval. Importantly, this act of resistance helped the YELI family-school partnership recognize the importance of operating from a community-centered platform, and to not be or remain contingent on a school-centric system subject to electoral political shifts that often alter the direction and priorities of school districts. Put differently, a community-centered approach implies that the well-being of children and families should not depend on who is elected to the school board. The following tension and response strategy exemplifies another act of resistance and how it led to the school district acknowledging the importance of shifting from a school-centric to community-centered paradigm to foster more equitable collaboration.

**Tension #5: Resisting the School-Centric Paradigm with the Community-Schools Grant Program**


On October 28, 2022, the YELI family-school partnership hosted a community-schools forum for parents and organizations to learn about the Yorbas Unified School District's California Community Schools Partnership Program, consisting of a five-year \$5.7 million grant. At this virtual forum, Renata—representing the school district—presented an overview of the community-school program, the systems and structures that must be in place to expand the community-schools model across the school district, and how the community-schools program would partner with the YELI family-school partnership. Renata described community-schools as

a place that supports learning and prioritizes the well-being of children, young people, and adults—a place where families, educators, and community partners are authentic partners in school design and decision-making, and how community-schools leverage the expertise and resources of the broader community to deliver services for mental and physical health care, nutrition, social services, and learning supports that meet students’ and families’ needs. Next, Renata described the pillars, goals, and the four elementary schools selected to pilot the community-schools program. The four pillars of the California Community-Schools Framework included integrated support services, family and community engagement, collaborative leadership and practices for educators and administrators, and extended learning time and opportunities. Renata described the two overarching goals of the community-schools program, which consisted of strengthening the coordination and system delivery for students and families and establishing Wellness Centers as community hubs at each school site. Figure 5 below highlights the two goals presented during the community schools forum.

Figure 5.

## Goals of Community Schools Initiative

07 **Two overarching goals**



Strengthen the coordination and system delivery to students and families to ensure timely and relevant service.

Establish schools as community hubs through each site's Wellness Center.

After Renata finished her portion of the presentation, a few parents raised concerns with the community-schools program. For example, Rosalba, a parent leader, shared that without the support and commitment of school principals, the school district's community-schools program would not succeed. Rosalba stated:

(Original Statement in Spanish) Falta demasiado para que nuestra escuela sea un escuela comunitaria, el director no se presta tanto para este esfuerzo, ahorita el poder la tiene la asociación del PTA...trate de hablar con el director y trabajadora de enlaces comunitarios, pero no he recibido respuesta de ellos, me gustaría que si existiera eso y que en realidad sea así las escuelas comunitarias...

(English translation) Too much is missing to make our school a community-school, the principal does not lend himself so much for this effort, right now the PTA association has the power... I tried to speak with the principal and family engagement liaison, but I have not received an answer from them, I would like for that to exist and for community-schools to be that way really... (Interview with Rosalba, February 2023)

The tension with school principals was evident in October 2022 due to the challenges they were experiencing when trying to outreach and ensure the principals engaged the YELI family-school partnership. This issue is described in more detail in Chapter Five.

In response to the feedback throughout the forum, Armando stepped in to clarify a few points. First, he explained the reasons why four pilot elementary schools were identified and selected, describing how the selection process was based on a framework established by the state to ensure that schools with the highest needs received the funding. Second, Armando explained why elementary schools were prioritized, detailing the intent to align the community-school program with the district's student graduate profile, which underscored the importance of investing in early education and building a strong system of support for family with children 0 to 9 years of age. Third, Armando emphasized that the YELI family-school partnership would play a vital role in shaping the community-schools program.

However, Gloria argued that the school district did not involve the YELI family-school partnership in the design or shared decision-making process. In particular, Gloria perceived that the school district's community-schools program would take over the YELI family-school partnership. For instance, the community-schools program was designed similarly to the YELI family-school partnership, with comparable goals, strategies, and even its theory of change. During the community-schools forum, the school district described how each pilot school site would have a coordinating team and used Gloria and Sofia's role with the YELI family-school partnership as an example. Gloria stated:

So, when they talked about the community schools, it was basically everything that YELI had done in the past or was doing... So, what's the role of YELI if YUSD is going to have community-schools, because in way for me it sounded like community-schools was really going to be doing what YELI is doing, and if that was the case, then there's no place for YELI, right? And for me that question was very important, because then it's going to signal for me like if there's really no role for YELI within the

community... and that was something that I was not the only one confused about it, but I know partners were confused about it. (Interview with Gloria, February 2023)

As time went on, Gloria's concern that the school district would take over the partnership increased, also causing her to worry about the sustainability of her and her team's employment. Gloria argued that the YELI family-school partnership was not being invited to the shared design and decision-making table. After multiple failed efforts to convene with district leaders to discuss the role of YELI family-school partnership with the community-schools program, Gloria was convinced that the school district was potentially planning to take over the work. She stated:

...I know it used to be a partnership, but it doesn't seem that way anymore, because even when I reached out to different people about the parent learning walks. They put a stop on me, and they're like sort of saying like don't question that anymore; YUSD is just going to do it...they did not include us in the conversation and definitely have been putting obstacles when I want to talk about it...so I send multiple emails about it...and I don't hear back or they just say, oh right now we can't or we don't have the capacity, or we can't do it and stuff like that, and when I try to bring it up again, it's the same thing, so it's like I can never get a meeting to talk about that. (Interview with Gloria, February 2023)

Convinced that the school district was taking control of the work or stepping away from the YELI family-school partnership, Gloria reached out to Armando to seek his support and guidance navigating the tension.

### ***Leveraging Power for Transformation***

On May 5, 2023, Armando convened an 'alignment' meeting with the intent of addressing the tension between the school district and backbone agency concerning the community-schools program. The meeting included the school district's executive cabinet, the backbone organization for the YELI family-school partnership, the designated First 5 program officer, and a researcher from UC Yorbas. The following table lists the meeting participants.

**Table 3.*****List of Participants in the Alignment Meeting***

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Agency</b>
Ingrid	Director of Family Engagement	Yorbas Unified School District
Baudelia	Assistant Superintendent, K-12	Yorbas Unified School District
Renata	Director of Elementary Student Success	Yorbas Unified School District
Dr. Brenda	Deputy Superintendent	Yorbas Unified School District
Katie	Director of Early Childhood Education	Yorbas Unified School District
Gloria	Director	Backbone Agency
Sofia	Coordinator	Backbone Agency
Sarah	Program Officer	First 5
Jorge	Researcher	UC Yorbas
Armando	Founder	YELI Family-School Partnership and Yorbas Unified School Board

Armando shared that the purpose of the meeting was to strengthen alignment amongst the school district and the YELI family-school partnership. The following paragraphs narrate how the alignment meeting unfolded, including how Armando called out the school district's school-centric approach with the design and implementation of the community-schools program, and how the participants acknowledged the importance of using a community-centered approach moving forward.

***On The Border of a Precipice for a Paradigm Shift***

After providing an in-depth overview of the history and purpose of the YELI family-school partnership, Armando re-emphasized the importance of strengthening alignment between the school district and the YELI family-school partnership, especially around the community-schools initiative. He stated:

So really the purpose for today is to see if we can strengthen alignment, and how you may have intuited from the presentation, we go through these cycles in this collaborative work where we are communicating really well and sometimes, we are not... its important just to stop and figure out if we are all on the same bus and going in the same direction. So really today it's just about how we can strengthen the

alignment by doing a couple of things, one is about sharing some updates about what is going on with the district...but then also to give Gloria, Sofia, Sarah, and Jorge time to share anything else that's going on with YELI, so that we hear that and then together we discuss, well how can we align. But the interest here is how can we align efforts around these four schools we are calling community-schools... (Armando, May 2023)

Renata started by providing an update on the community-schools grant program, and shared that the four pilot schools were in the process of developing a needs assessment and implementation plan. Moreover, Renata explained how she and Ingrid had been working to ensure the school district had the capacity and infrastructure in place to ensure the community-schools program succeeded. Renata stated:

Our role is to really make sure that the conditions are what they need to be, that the infrastructure is sound, so that's the work that's happening for now at these sites...it's up to us to get to remove the barriers or finds creative ways to make sure that those decisions, those needs, are met, and so that's where my head has been living, the infrastructure, because systems is always where my brain lives. (May 2023)

Particularly, the school district focused on establishing a sufficient infrastructure to effectively implement the community-schools grant program and achieve the goals and deliverables outlined in the CA community-schools grant. To form this infrastructure, Ingrid and Renata described how the school district focused on building and strengthening the capacity of educators and principals and streamlined opportunities for community partners to join the community-schools program.

After listening to the updates from the school district, Armando illuminated how the school district was on the border of a precipice for a paradigm shift, yet it was still operating from a school-centric paradigm with the community-schools program. For example, Armando highlighted how the school district excluded the YELI family-school partnership from the co-design and decision-making processes. Armando stated:

...what I see systems doing is working as systems, it sounds redundant, but it's very systems-centric versus community centered. YELI is rooted in a community-centered

approach where the school district is part of a broader community where systems interact with children and families, and so I want to stress that because what has not happened is the inclusion of YELI in the co-design and co-planning. Would you agree with that? In other words, when the community-schools initiative started, Gloria and Sofia and others from YELI not only should have been invited but the planning should have happened here ...I'm just trying to figure out how we can get back on track with the original concept of having YELI as the platform for this work to be done, we are not being invited in because we haven't. Here I'm putting on my role as a YELI person, the invitation has never been extended for Gloria and Sofia to be part of the co-design processes at the district level or at the site level. (May 5, 2023)

In contrast with the tension around the inclusion-exclusion of parents at the beginning of this chapter, in this case there was no clear, transparent, and agreed-upon rationale behind why the school district decided to exclude the YELI family-school partnership from the co-design of the community-schools initiative. This tension highlights how traditional, deficit-oriented, dominant, school-centered logics are baked into how schools operate, and how easily school district leaders' default to school-centric practices despite their support of and involvement in other family-school spaces pushing for more equitable approach for collaboration. Therefore, by facilitating a learning space to not only call out but more so help the school district leaders understand how they were engaging in a school-centric approach, Armando sought to help the school district embrace and shift to a community-centered approach to designing and implementing the community-schools initiative. Shifting to a community-centered approach meant that the school district needed to better align its community-schools strategy with the YELI family-school partnership's work.

Dr. Brenda, assistant superintendent, shared how Armando's overview of the YELI family-school partnership helped her better understand how the YELI family-school partnership aligned with the district's community-schools initiative. Moreover, Dr. Brenda implied the importance of school principals and family engagement liaisons understanding the history, purpose, and existing collaborative mechanisms within the YELI family-school partnership to

identifying opportunities to align the work happening in community-schools initiative with the YELI family-school partnership. After Armando called out the school district for excluding the YELI family-school partnership from the community-schools initiative, Dr. Brenda stated:

...I think that was helpful for me and I was reflecting on my own leadership and practice and was like, darn it, I wish that I would have known better and would have thought about this earlier...I think when a person knows better, they can make better decisions, right, so I appreciated having that overview. I've always heard about YELI, obviously since I've been here, but having this overview really helped me and its why I was able to make that connection...and it became very obvious for me that what this actually is and how this should actually happen... (May 2023)

Next, the group began identifying and discussing pragmatic opportunities to improve alignment between the school district and the YELI family-school partnership. Particularly, Diana inquired how the school district could embrace a community-centered approach for the community-schools program, and highlighted the collaborative structure used to develop and implement the parent leadership development training series. Diana stated:

...so I'm curious to hear how we envision this for the district...I feel like we already collaborate, but it's on very specific topics, right, for the work that we're doing with the parent leadership training. So it feels like we have a structure. Do we take the way we collaborate for that and translate it for this work? (May 2023)

Gloria shared how the YELI family-school partnership preceded the school district's community-schools program and suggested that the school district should not be reinventing the wheel but rather leveraging the existing community-centered spaces to co-design and implement the community-schools program. Gloria stated:

...the concept of community-schools at Yorbas came after what was already coming to schools, the model is there, and so I'm like, oh...they're trying to an assessment, well, YELI did an assessment already. So why not leverage what was already done that was already community driven... (May 2023)

Sofia offered an example of how the YELI family-school partnership operated from a community-centered paradigm by centering parents as experts, and involving their voices,

knowledge, and expertise from the beginning, and not just when the opportunity or necessity arises to meet specific grant deliverables. Sofia stated:

So when we talk about collaboration, I really think it needs to start from the beginning and not like, oh well, let's get the information going...let's understand the information, and then you can listen to the information together and figure out how we are going to work together and collaborate and create these learning environments for both our families and obviously, ultimately, for us to be able to have things that sustain... (May 2023)

Renata and Dr. Brenda described how school leaders were not operating this way out of malice, and it was just the way administrators are programmed to think. Ingrid explained how she sometimes felt like she operates from a school-centric paradigm, especially when dealing with the institutional pressures and mandates to meet grant timelines and deadlines. Ingrid stated:

I've always felt like there's times that I do the same thing as leaders, we're trying to meet a timeline, a deadline, and sometimes it's those pressures that makes us not take the time to really have the focus... (May 2023)

Armando reiterated his perspective of the school district being on the border of a precipice for a paradigm shift and used a diagram in the alignment meeting to illustrate the difference between a school-centric and community-centered paradigm. Figure A refers to a school-centric paradigm where school leaders and administrators operate from the belief that students and families only interact with the school. Figure B illustrates a community-centered paradigm, where the schools are one component of a broader multi-stakeholder environment interacting with children and families.

Figure 6. Armando's Diagram of a School Centered Paradigm

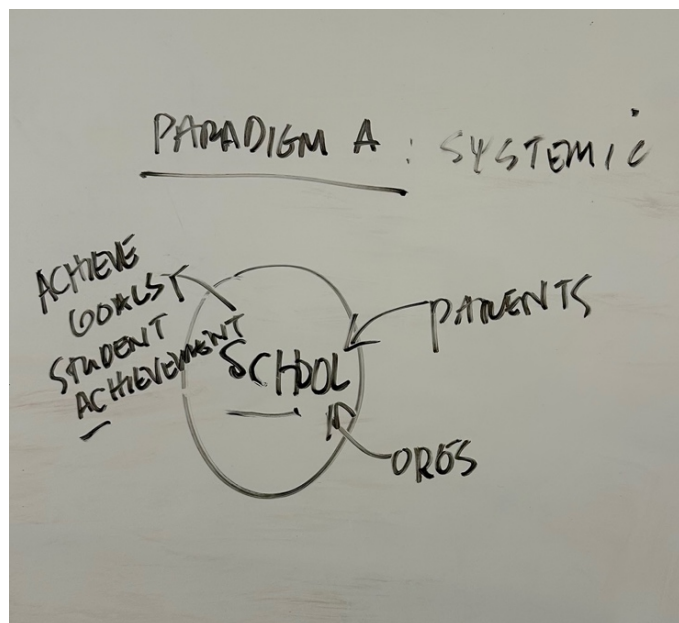
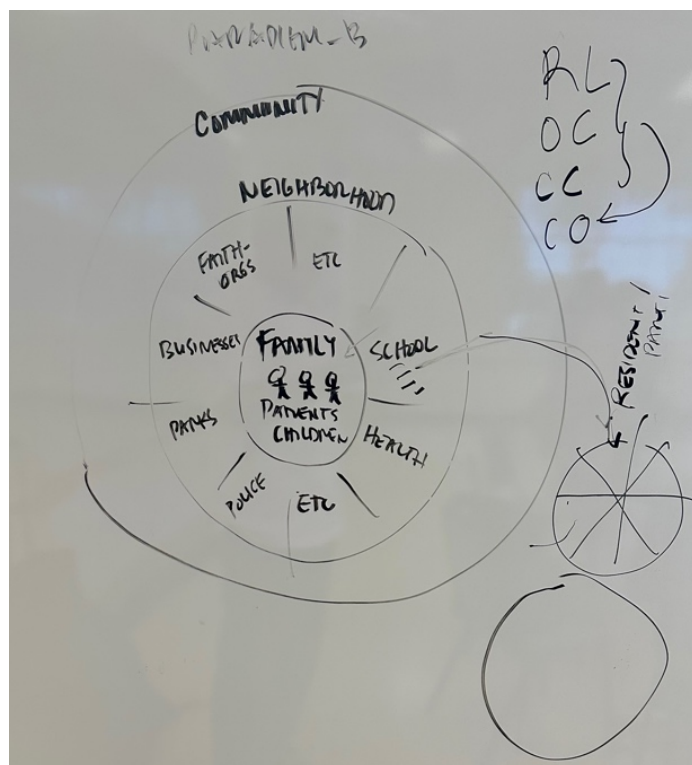


Figure 7. Armando's Diagram of a Community Centered Paradigm



Armando stated:

...under this paradigm [B], it's a more community centered paradigm, right? Where the family and the children and the neighborhood and the community that they are in is the center, it's the axis mundi, right? Because this child doesn't just go to school, right...it's in all these other places, the park, the businesses, faith organizations, interacting with the police, law enforcement, health, and so on and so forth, right? So the YELI family-school partnership, from my perspective, starts from this platform, like what is happening to the parent, the child, and the family in this broader social ecology, right...in this context of this community that we can leverage resources so that the family, the children, et cetera, can find greater support through multiple systems...so that the school is one component but not all of it, right? (May 2023)

Furthermore, Armando asserted how the tension with community-schools would have played out differently if the school district operated from a community-centered paradigm. The following vignette narrates how the alignment meeting concluded.

***Audio Recording (May 5, 2023)***

Armando: "What I'm suggesting is that this is the paradigm that I would suggest we operate from, if we had, then the community school grant that the school got would have come into the YELI family-school partnership space. We already have the partners here, and through this space we would have built on what we already have done, and in the specific schools...we would have involved those parents who are already here, it would have played out differently...it's just a reflection on we are so on the edge of this precipice of moving into this paradigm, but we haven't jumped in yet/ I think the community-schools in practice tells me that we're still in this other paradigm, right?"

Baudelia: "We have an opportunity here to do something different, and in the community schools grant, it is a requirement to develop a parent advisory council, but it doesn't mandate who needs to be in it."

Armando: "My suggestion, is that we bring the four principals and the parents who are involved in work at this point into this space, we can even have a separate meeting, at least just to onboard them into YELI, and so that it's through this space that we can codesign whether it's the needs assessment..."

Ingrid: "Right, you already have the structures in place..."

Gloria: "YELI already has the structures and processes for this meeting. We did the assets already, we did the Wellness Centers..."

Armando: “What I think what community schools is asking us to do a little bit more of is how do and by that I'm going to put myself as the district. How do we as a district, in addition to providing the in kind and collaborative resources, like the co-planning, co-design of the session, and think about how YELI can help us transform our schools, how can we leverage YELI to transform our schools? So, a couple of things, I think. One is we already have parents that are active in YELI from those schools. So those parents' ought to be key in those schools, right. We already have a space for co planning to happen. So, can we leverage this collaborative space to do that planning? And then we have nonprofit partners and other partners. So, can we leverage those partners to support the process? Right.”

Ingrid: “I think I was overthinking, I was working too hard, like, the systems and structures are there and it's just, okay, we already have general sessions, we already have, it's just about shifting, and so I think for me, next step is okay, now that we'll all in agreement that this is how we work with each other, let's start, let's go. The infrastructure is already there, you don't have to invent, its already there.”

The tension with the community-schools initiative illuminates a vulnerable moment for the YELI family-school partnership, where Gloria, as the director of the backbone organization, felt that the school district was taking over and threatening the existence of the YELI family-school partnership. To address this tension, an alignment meeting was convened with the purpose of figuring out how to better align the school district and YELI family-school partnership around the community-schools initiative. Examining the enacted response strategy through a transformational resistance framework (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001) suggests that the alignment meeting nurtured a transformational opportunity to foster a more equitable approach for collaboration. The alignment meeting was convened to address the exclusion of the YELI family-school partnership in the school district's planning and development to the community-schools initiative. In contrast with the tension over the exclusion of parents at the beginning of this chapter, there was no clear or transparent rationale for the exclusion of the YELI family-school partnership, which generated several assumptions, such as the belief that the school district was taking over. Discussion during the debrief suggested that the school district leaders were simply administrating the community-schools grant program as they usually do with any

other grants, revealing how traditional, conventional, dominant school-centric logics are baked into the school district culture and way of doing things. Compared with the tension with the exclusion of parents, the enacted response strategy in this case was not about creating the strategic processes to center parent voices; rather the intent of the response strategy was to develop awareness of the existing collaboration mechanisms that were already established within the YELI family-school partnership. In other words, the school district did not need to “recreate the wheel,” but rather, recognize and strategize how to align and leverage the existing collaborative spaces within the YELI family-school partnership. Therefore, this enacted response strategy was propelled by a critical understanding of how traditional and dominant school-centric logics are baked into the institutional culture within schools, which presumes that schools exist in a bubble outside and external to the surrounding communities and political, economic, and social contexts. The response strategy also illustrated how Armando activated his positional power and influence to convene and facilitate the ‘alignment’ meeting as a collective learning space, with the purpose of pushing the district across the border of the precipice for a paradigm shift from a school-centric to a community-centered approach for collaboration. At the end of the alignment meeting, the school district leaders began identifying practical ways and opportunities to leverage the existing spaces within the YELI family-school partnership for future co-designing meetings for the community-schools grant. For example, a district leader suggested that the YELI family-school partnership should host future community-schools advisory council meetings, identifying and inviting parent leaders who were actively involved with the YELI family-school partnership, getting students enrolled in the pilot schools, and validating the needs assessment that was conducted in 2022 by parent leaders through the YELI family-school partnership.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I describe how three response strategies transformed the YELI family-school partnership by fostering more equitable approaches for collaboration. A common thread across all three tensions entailed acts of resistance to school-centric norms, and response strategies that led to a transformative shift in the family-school partnership toward a community-centered paradigm of collaboration. More importantly, this chapter highlighted how power was activated by parents, community organizations, and Armando, and how this activation of power informed and shaped the enacted response strategy to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. In particular, the enacted response strategy to address the tension over the inclusion-exclusion of parents was shaped by the resistance and activation of power on behalf of the community-based organizations, which resulted in the partnership leaders developing a clear, transparent, and agreed-upon strategy to center parents as educational leaders. The enacted response strategy to address the tension with the Wellness Centers was informed by parents and community organizations resisting the ineffectiveness of the partnership's school-centric strategy, which led to the recognition of the importance of community-centered strategies that are not dependent on the permission or approval of the school district. The third enacted response strategy was a product of the backbone agency resisting the school district's school-centric approach with the community-schools initiative, which resulted in Armando activating his positional power as a governing board member, founder, educator, and facilitator to convene a pivotal alignment meeting that helped the school district acknowledge the need to shift from a school-centric to a community-centered approach for collaboration. Moreover, I have described the transformative elements of the three response strategies, which were propelled by a critical awareness and resistance to the traditional, conventional, dominant, deficit-oriented, and school-

centric norms of collaboration, and by a desire to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Understanding the complexities of the enacted response strategies is critically important to strengthening the capacity of cross-sector collaboration leaders and practitioners to navigate tensions in ways that can foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. Understanding the enacted response strategies matters because tensions are inevitable, especially in family-school partnerships immersed in asymmetrical power relations. Specifically, understanding how tensions are addressed matters if we remain committed to the belief that educational equity is attainable through family-school partnerships and cross-sector collaborations. The cross-sector collaboration field is filled with stories and data highlighting the tremendous challenges and lack of progress to achieve large-scale social change (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Although the academic literature offers a promising equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2020), there is a need to better understand and strengthen our competency to identify, navigate, and respond to the inevitable tensions that will emerge in collaborative spaces infused with asymmetrical power dynamics. The findings in this study shed light into the ways tensions can be navigated in ways that foster more equitable approaches for collaboration, and ultimately move the needle forward in the collective effort to advance educational equity in low-income, marginalized communities.

## Chapter 7: Discussion & Implications

In this dissertation, I sought to understand how efforts to address tensions in a family-school partnership became spaces that either reproduced conventional power asymmetries or fostered more equitable approaches for collaboration. I present a case of a community-driven family-school partnership seeking to improve early learning outcomes, which set itself apart from other types of collaborations due to the role and involvement of the local school district. To analyze the tensions and enacted response strategies, I used a conceptual lens that combined Solorzano & Bernal's (2001) transformational resistance with Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration framework. By drawing on transformational resistance theoretical in tandem with equitable collaboration, I was able to discern two types of responses, which consisted of conformist and transformational strategies (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). First, I described response strategies that conformed to conventional power asymmetries and privileged the educational knowledge and technical expertise of formal education and school leaders over non-dominant parents and community-based organizations. I argue that these response strategies conformed to the conventional, dominant, deficit-oriented, and school-centric paradigms of family engagement that perceive non-dominant parents as passive, dependent, and submissive clients (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Olivos, 2006; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Second, I described transformational response strategies that resisted conventional power asymmetries and centered the voices, knowledge, and leadership of non-dominant parents and community-based organizations. I argue that transformational response strategies fostered more equitable approaches for collaboration and offered the greatest possibilities to advance the partnership's shared vision of improving early learning outcomes. Moreover, I argue that the response strategies that centered parents as educational leaders were transformational because

they required disrupting conventional power asymmetries and pivoted the partnership's work towards an equitable approach of collaboration (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Ishimaru, 2020). Lastly, I want to clarify that although this study adopted Mease's (2019) ATA as a guiding framework to examine the four foci: tensions, contexts, enacted strategies and repertoire of response strategies, I did not analyze these four foci using the ATA framework's analytical or change loops. Rather, to examine the role of dominant power asymmetries, I used a conceptual lens that combined transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001) and equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020) to analyze the tensions, contexts, enacted strategies, and repertoire of response strategies across this dissertation. This chapter narrates the enacted response strategies in more detail and situates this study in dialogue with the informing literature and conceptual framework. This chapter culminates with implications for theory and practice.

### **Repertoire of Response Strategies**

The following section outlines a repertoire of response strategies to help policymakers, scholars, and practitioners navigate and address tensions in ways that can foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. This repertoire offers an analysis of conforming and transformational types of response strategies. Table Four provides a summary of the repertoire of response strategies.

**Table 4. Repertoire of Response Strategies**

<b>Tension</b>	<b>Response Strategy</b>	<b>Strategy Type</b>
Unresponsive School Principals	School leader imposes a hierarchical communication protocol that <b>privileged formal educational knowledge and communication</b> practices of school leaders over community.	Conforming Strategy
Concern with the capacity of the planning team to design and implement the parent	Partnership leader convenes a meeting to engage in reflective leadership practice that results in <b>privileging formal educational</b>	Conforming Strategy

leadership training curriculum	<b>knowledge and practices</b> of school leaders over community.	
Exclusion-Inclusion of Parents	Partnership leaders established a clear and transparent decision-making process that built collective buy-in and pledged <b>to center parents as educational leaders.</b>	Transformational Strategy
School District prevents parents from co-designing the Wellness Centers	Partnership leaders veered towards <b>strategies that they had the agency and authority</b> to shape and implement.	Transformational Strategy
School District excluding the YELI family-school partnership from the community-schools initiative	Partnership leaders convened a space to engage in reflective leadership practice resulting in school leaders leveraging the YELI partnership's structure to <b>center the voices, knowledge, and leadership of non-dominant parents and the community.</b>	Transformational Strategy

### **Conforming Strategies: Privileging the Educational Knowledge and Expertise of School Leaders**

This study illustrates two examples where the enacted response strategies resulted in privileging the formal educational and technical expertise of school leaders over that of the parents and community-based organizations. To resolve the tension with unresponsive elementary school principals, Ingrid, the school district's director of family engagement, imposed a communication protocol to centralize the communication process between the school district and the YELI family-school partnership. The intent of the communication protocol was to create a formal process for parents, community-based organizations, and the managing backbone agency to submit specific requests through the school district's Office for Community Engagement. According to Ingrid, the communication protocol addressed the tension with unresponsive school principals because the school district's Office for Community Engagement had the hierarchical power to require, approve, and authorize external requests for school principals and staff to engage in community programs or events. Since parents and external

community-based organizations did not have the authority to compel school principal and staff participate in the partnership, Ingrid argued the community protocol created a mechanism to achieve the same objective.

Drawing on the transformational resistance and equitable collaboration framework, I argue that this strategy conformed to the conventional, dominant, school-centric logics that are baked in the day-to-day school practices by legitimizing the educational knowledge and technical expertise of school leaders over the knowledge(s), leadership, and practices of parents and community partners (Auerbach, 2010; Ishimaru, 2020; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Honig, 2004; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Although this response strategy was propelled by Ingrid's desire for the partnership to succeed, it conformed to the conventional power asymmetries between schools and parents (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Olivos, 2006; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Ingrid's motive was based on the belief that principals needed to engage for the partnership to be successful. Yet, her response strategy was rooted in a critique that parents and the backbone agency were using confrontational tactics that were 'burning bridges,' and she felt compelled to step in and fix the problem. An analysis of this strategy highlights the importance for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners to understand how to address tensions in ways that both disrupt conventional power asymmetries, and center the voices, knowledge(s), and leadership of parents and communities.

In similar fashion, I found the enacted response strategy to address the tension over the planning committee's perceived lack of capacity with the parent leadership curriculum also privileged the formal educational knowledge and technical expertise of school leaders over community knowledge, leadership, and practices (Ishimaru, 2020; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). In this case, Armando activated his positional power to convene a space for reflective leadership

practice that resulted in privileging the educational knowledge and expertise of Renata, despite her apparent lack of knowledge and experience with community-based parent leadership development programs. An analysis of this response strategy reveals that this act was propelled by Armando's desire to improve the quality of the parent leadership training program, yet the solution conformed to the conventional power asymmetries that legitimize Renata's knowledge and expertise, while undervaluing the knowledge of Gloria and Sofia, who were leading the planning, design, and implementation of the parent leadership curriculum (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2020; Ishimaru, 2020; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Noroña, C. R., et. al., 2023; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Moreover, I argue that the solution did not actually address the issue over presumed lack of capacity of the planning committee. Instead, I interpreted the solution as Armando's attempt to apply a quick fix or 'band-aid' to the issue without needing to invest the time and resources to build the capacity of the planning committee. Armando's positional power as a cis Latino male, school board governing member, experienced professional facilitator, and founder of the partnership, influenced and shaped the solution that privileged the formal educational knowledge and technical expertise of Renata, over Gloria and Sofia's knowledge and experience managing the YELI family-school partnership (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2020; Ishimaru, 2020; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Freire, 1970; Shirley, 1997; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

### **Transformational Strategies: Centering Parents as Educational Leaders and Experts**

Conversely, I argue that the following three strategies transformed the partnership by cultivating a more equitable approach for collaboration (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

Specifically, the following three response strategies involved centering parents as educational leaders and experts. First, to address the parent inclusion-exclusion tension, partnership leaders

were pressured to articulate a convincing and transparent rationale that justified the exclusion of parents to nurture the collective buy-in and commitment from the school district and organizational partners. To ensure that community organizations bought into the partnership's shared vision, this rationale needed to address the concern over the exclusion of parents, which was rooted in the history of conventional and deficit-based school-centric practices that position parents as outsiders, spectators and clients, expected to passively support for pre-established agendas (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Bernal & Aleman, Jr., 2017; Ishimaru, 2014; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Shirley, 1997). Drawing on the transformational resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001) in tandem with equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020), I contend that this response strategy was transformational for the following reasons. The resistance to parent exclusion by the community organizations pressured partnership leaders and the school leaders to reveal their embedded assumptions and intentions over the role of parents in the partnership. Consequently, the partnership made a shared decision and commitment that they would develop strategic and supportive parent engagement infrastructure to ultimately center parents as educational leaders. An analysis of this strategy exhibited how the resistance from community-based organizations was propelled by the desire to disrupt the dominant, status quo and conventional approaches that undervalue the knowledge(s), leadership, and cultural practices of parents (Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016; Ishimaru, 2014; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Shirley, 1997; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). On the other end, this response strategy was transformational because it led to the development of a strategic plan, consisting of a landscape analysis and comprehensive parent leadership develop trajectory, to center parents as educational leaders within the YELI family-school partnership. Thus, I argue that the characteristics of this response strategy suggest that it was transformational (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Particularly,

the community-based organizations' desire to interrupt the conventional power asymmetries, and the resulting strategy to center parents as educational leaders, transformed the practices within the family-school partnership towards a more equitable approach for collaboration (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

Next, I describe how the enacted response to address the tension with the school district's community-schools initiative ended up transforming the partnership towards a more equitable collaboration. Specifically, this response strategy led to a commitment by school leaders to shift paradigms and center parents as educational leaders in the community-schools initiative (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Like the response strategy with the parent leadership curriculum, Armando activated his positional power to convene key leaders within the school district, the YELI backbone organization, a university research partner, and the designated program officer from the First 5 agency. However, in this case, Armando used his positional power and authority to challenge the way that school district leaders were administering the community-schools grant program. Armando activated his positional authority to help school leaders were engaging in a school-centric paradigm that was excluding the YELI family-school partnership. Specifically, Armando achieved this outcome by providing a historical overview of the partnership, inviting school leaders to share a progress update on the community-schools grant program, and by calling out the school leaders for engaging in school-centric practices. To help school leaders understand how to shift over to a community-centered paradigm, Armando offered pragmatic examples of ways that the school could administrate the grant by centering parents as educational leaders. Towards the end of the meeting, school leaders began identifying additional opportunities and spaces to co-design the community-schools grant program by leveraging the existing YELI family-school partnership's infrastructure. For instance, the school leaders

committed to moving the planning meetings from the district office to the Esqueda Community Center. An analysis of this response strategy demonstrates how Armando activated his positional power to disrupt the conventional school-centric approach, and how school leaders ended up embracing a process to center parent leadership by leveraging the existing community infrastructure within the YELI family-school partnership (Bernal & Aleman, Jr., 2017; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Ishimaru, 2014; Ishimaru, 2020; Mediratta, et al., 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Rodela & Bertrand, 2023; Shirley, 1997; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Warren & Mapp, 2011). In short, this response strategy transformed the practices within the family-school partnership towards a more equitable collaboration (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

The Wellness Centers example makes the case that family-school partnerships should not be supporting or endorsing strategies that require the permission or approval of formal systems and institutions, such as school districts which are subject to unstable political environments (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Freire, 1970; Ishimaru, 2017; Johnson, 2012; Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006; Olivos, 2006). This strategy emerged in response to the tension over the school district's control of the Wellness Centers. I argue that this response strategy was transformational for the following reasons (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). First, this strategy was propelled by resistance from parents and community organizations towards disrupting the structural power asymmetries that enable schools to undermine the partnership's work with the Wellness Centers. Second, the pressure from parents and community organizations revealed the significance of partnership's having the agency and authority to influence and shape strategies to center parents as educational leaders. Consequently, the partnership decided to move away from the Wellness Centers, and prioritized strategies they had control over. Specifically, the partnership decided to increase the base of parent leaders by expanding its parent leadership program, develop

neighborhood level projects led by parents, and form of a parent-led advocacy task force to meet the needs of families with young children throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Implications for Theory**

To cultivate equitable collaboration, Ishimaru (2020) offers a conceptual framework to analyze parent engagement and family-school relations. Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration framework illustrates the contrasting rules of engagement in family-school relationships across four dimensions: goals, strategies, parent roles, and process. This study drew on Ishimaru's (2020) equitable collaboration framework to discern the moments and spaces where the partnership goals and strategies were being negotiated, where key decisions were made, and where transformative ruptures were more likely to unfold (Bernal & Aleman, Jr., 2017). Specifically, by examining these moments and spaces, I found two types of response strategies. The first type of response strategies reproduced conventional power asymmetries by privileging the formal educational knowledge and practices of school leaders over parents and community-based organizations. The second type of response strategies disrupted the conventional power asymmetries and centered the knowledge(s), experiences, and leadership of parents and community organizations. Thus, to cultivate equitable collaboration, this study implies the need for scholars and practitioners to understand and strengthen our capacity to address tensions in ways that disrupt conventional power asymmetries while also striving to center parents as educational leaders within partnerships.

While an equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2020) can point scholars and practitioners to the moments where tensions are more likely to emerge, understanding how to effectively navigate and address these tensions is complex. Particularly, as practitioners, it may be challenging to understand when and how to disrupt conventional power asymmetries,

especially if it requires practitioners to step up and activate their positional power and authority to address these tensions. This study implies that efforts to center parents as educational leaders may require a deliberate act of power and resistance. For instance, this study described how Armando activated his positional power, and how community organizations engaged in resistance, to catalyze efforts to center parents as educational leaders. Thus, I wonder if we can cultivate equitable collaborations without the individuals activating and leveraging power to propel partnerships towards more equitable approaches of collaboration? If the ability to foster equitable approaches for collaboration depends on the willingness of formal and systems-based leaders to activate their power, then I wonder what types of leadership practices are needed to cultivate equitable collaborations? Future research should examine the leadership practices of these individual leaders and the implications of their actions to leverage individual and collective power to undermine or cultivate equitable collaboration (Ishimaru, 2020).

A prevailing theme in this study consisted of the difference between a school-centric paradigm and a community-centered paradigm for collaboration. A school-centric paradigm refers to the traditional, conventional, and dominant belief systems that may influence and shape how schools make decisions (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2021). A school-centric paradigm implies that schools exist and operate in isolation, insulated from broader community and political contexts (Ishimaru, 2020). For example, this study illustrated how the school district was using a school-centric approach to administrate the community-schools grant program. Other ways that schools often operate through this school-centric paradigm consist of how school districts and school sites exclude the voices of youth, parents, and families in the processes to develop budgets, policies, and programs to meet the learning needs of students.

In contrast, a community-centered paradigm aligns more closely with the guiding principles and values within the equitable collaboration, educational organizing, and shared leadership literatures (Bell, 2013; Escala Rabada, et al., 2011; Ishimaru, 2020; Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). Basically, a community-centered paradigm presumes that schools do not exist in isolation, but are part of a broader social, political, and economic context that influence and shape educational opportunities and quality of life outcomes. To cultivate equitable collaborations, we need to approach partnership development strategies through a community-centered paradigm. A community-centered paradigm insists that practitioners and school leaders acknowledge the importance of and how to center parents as educational leaders. To center parents as educational leaders within partnerships, the educational organizing and shared leadership literature tells us that we need to build trust, strong bonds, and reciprocal relationships (Bell, 2013; Escala Rabada, et al., 2011; Ishimaru, 2020; Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). To build trust, strong bonds, and reciprocal relationships, this study implies that practitioners need to understand how to effectively navigate and address tensions in ways to promote more equitable approaches for collaboration. Otherwise, practitioners risk promoting response strategies that impair the trust and relationship building processes within collaborations by reproducing conventional power asymmetries and privileging formal educational knowledge(s) and practices of school leaders over parents (Ishimaru, 2020; Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018). More importantly, this study implies that building trust and reciprocal relationships may require that individual leaders activate their positional power and leverage the collective power of non-dominant parents and community-based organizations, to navigate tensions rooted in conventional power asymmetries. This is particularly important because we need to understand how to effectively address tensions

to build trust and strong reciprocal relationships in partnerships with non-dominant parents, community-based organizations, and school leaders (Ishimaru, 2020; Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Welton & Freelon, 2018).

### **Implications for Policy & Practice**

Increasing investments in early childhood education in California continues to reference the research outlining the short-term and long-term benefits of high-quality early learning experiences (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2021). As a result, philanthropies, such as the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, Hilton Foundation, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, and the Ballmer Group, along with First 5 agencies across California, are intensifying their support for cross-sector collective impact collaborations to improve early learning and early childhood outcomes (Kania, et al., 2021). These investments in cross-sector collective impact collaborations continue nurturing the belief that effective collaborations can improve early learning outcomes and promote long-term success (Henig et. al., 2015; Horsford & Vazquez Heilig, 2014; Ishimaru, 2020; Kania, et al., 2021). Yet, research on cross-sector partnerships suggest that these investments regularly fall short of their large-scale ambitions due to the failure to center equity (Kania, et al., 2021). However, this study implies that collective impact collaborations keep falling short because we do not know how effectively navigate and address tensions to authentically center parents as educational leaders (Bernal & Aleman, Jr., 2017; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Ishimaru, 2020; Henig et. al. Mediratta, et al., 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Rodela & Bertrand, 2023; Shirley, 1997; Warren, et. al., 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

An extensive body of literature implies that we already know the importance of and what it takes to center equity (Bernal & Aleman, Jr., 2017; Ishimaru, 2020; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021;

Rodela & Bertrand, 2023). Nonetheless, I argue that cross-sector collaborations do not fall short because of the failure to center equity as a goal, but rather, they fall short because practitioners and leaders may not understand how or not be willing to activate and leverage their positional power, or the collective power of parents and community organizations, to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. This study reveals key strategies that policymakers and practitioners can build on to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. Importantly, we need policymakers and practitioners to acknowledge that tensions unfold as critical moments when partnerships are vulnerable to dominant power asymmetries, and the ways that leaders and practitioners can activate and leverage power to foster more equitable approaches for collaboration (Bernal & Aleman, Jr., 2017; Cooper, 2021, Ishimaru, 2020; Mease, 2019).

### **Unsettled Tensions**

An overarching tension in this case study involved Armando's pivotal role within the YELI family-school partnership. Particularly, Armando believed that without him the YELI family-school partnership would not exist. Armando attributes his early childhood experiences and social justice background, his academic and professional experiences designing and facilitating early childhood education initiatives, his extensive network with numerous community-based organizations and agencies in the City of Yorbas, and his role as a governing board member for the Yorbas Unified School District, as the part of the reason he was uniquely positioned to spearhead the development and sustainment of the YELI family-school partnership over the last eight years (2015-2023). Future research should examine about leaders, like Armando, and their backgrounds, roles, and experiences to learn about the leadership practices and networks that may be essential for building and sustaining cross-sector collaborations that

center parents and families as educational leaders, and that seek to reshape conventional power asymmetries.

Another key tension that merits more research pertains to the issue of sustainability. Armando's role in the partnership makes this tension particularly important as we think about how to sustain these partnerships and whether sustainability is linked to the skills, knowledge, and experiences of individual leaders. Although Armando claimed that the partnership would not exist without him, he was convinced that he was not needed to sustain it. Specifically, Armando's idea of sustainability was based on establishing a "highly functioning community-based governance infrastructure" with parents and families at the center of the decision-making process. Armando wanted to replicate the community-based governance infrastructure that he helped establish in Boyle Heights through Promesa Boyle Heights initiative ([promesaboyleheights.org](http://promesaboyleheights.org)). In contrast, Gloria, Renata, and Esmeralda, who represented the backbone agency, shared that the lack of funding was the most important issue for the YELI family-school partnership, and emphasized that they were already working to establish the partnership as a financially sustainable nonprofit organization. Gloria admitted to not understanding Armando's vision of a community-based governance infrastructure and suggested that the partnership needed to be financially sustainable before developing a governance infrastructure. The tension over the sustainability is particularly interesting to examine in future research, especially as we think about how to sustain equitable approaches for collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

We are in pivotal moment in the life of cross-sector collaborations, and continued faith in these approaches requires that communities begin realizing the ambitious shared visions sooner rather than later. The findings in this study begin to untangle the complexity of tensions and

response strategies that can foster more equitable approaches for collaboration. This dissertation unpacked two types of response strategies, those that privileged the formal educational knowledge and practices of school leaders over parents, and strategies that centered parents as educational leaders within the partnership. I intend to continue building on this dissertation to expand the repertoire of response strategies and strengthening our understanding and approaches to cultivate equitable collaboration. For now, I offer the distinction between school and community-centered approaches as an emerging conceptual model to help policymakers, scholars, and practitioners better understand how to navigate and address tensions to cultivate more equitable approaches for collaboration. I hope this emerging conceptual model can help scholars and practitioners gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the complexities of cultivating equitable collaborations, and more importantly, that this model can help practitioners begin to navigate tensions within their collaborative contexts. Ultimately, the success of these partnerships may not depend on more research telling us what we already know, but on our individual and collective willingness to do what is needed, what is right, what is required of us as policymakers, scholars, practitioners, parents, community members, educators, advocates, and so much more, to achieve the ambitious and shared vision for educational justice and equitable, healthy, and thriving families and communities.

## Appendix A

### List of Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Gloria*	YELI Director	Backbone Organization
Sofia*	YELI Program Coordinator	Backbone Organization
Esmeralda*	YELI Administrative Coordinator	Backbone Organization
Yolanda	Previous YELI Director	Backbone Organization
Armando*	Founder	
Isabella*	Parent Leader	YELI
Flor*	Parent Leader	YELI
Emma*	Parent Leader	YELI
Rosalba*	Parent Leader	YELI
Julia	Parent Leader	YELI
Ingrid*	Director of Family Engagement	Yorbas Unified School District
Renata*	Director of Elementary Education	Yorbas Unified School District
Silvia	Director of Community Relations	Yorbas Unified School District
Brenda	Deputy Superintendent	Yorbas Unified School District
Katie	Director of Early Childhood Education	Yorbas Unified School District
Baudelia	Director of Elementary Schools	Yorbas Unified School District
Jocelyn	Executive Director	Esqueda Center CBO
Maria Cruz*	Executive Director	Familias Fuertes CBO
Sarah*	Program Officer	First 5 (Funder)
Tomas	Professor	University of California, Yorbas

Lupe	Professor	Cal State Yorbas
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\*Focal participants

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