

Multicultural Institute: Parent Perceptions of After-School Programs

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**Abstract**

This qualitative research project analyzes data collected from focus groups composed of parents of students who participated in a non-profit after-school program in an urban community in California. The researchers sought to examine parent perceptions of the after-school programs offered by the Multicultural Institute in Berkeley, CA. A thematic analysis of the transcripts from the focus group conversations indicate that the programs are viewed very positively by the parents and they see many positive outcomes in the students. In order for the program to continue its success, several suggestions are offered in an effort to support the current programs and address any perceived service gaps.

*Key words: After-school Program, Reading, and Community Based Research*

## **Introduction and Background**

Founded in 1991, the Multicultural Institute (MI) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization created to improve educational outcomes for low-income students in the San Francisco Bay Area. After noting educational disparities for African American and Latino students in the Berkeley school district, Father Rigoberto Calocarivas, Ph.D, established MI to overcome service gaps in the educational system. What began initially as a mentoring program has now expanded to multiple programs, including tutoring, mentoring, and creative writing institutes in both Berkeley and Richmond, California. Between its two locations, MI serves over 60 Bay Area students every academic year.

### **Focal Program/Services for this Project**

The Multicultural Institute primarily serves students in the 3rd through 9th grades. MI's primary programs are its Mentoring for Academic Success Program (MAS), which provides in-school and after-school academic support to prepare students for post-secondary education, and its Youth Writing Festival (YWF), which is a summer academy for students to develop their artistic talents and nurture their creative writing ability. With a dedicated group of staff and volunteers, MI provides year-round programming to foster student growth and leadership.

In addition to its educational underpinnings, the Multicultural Institute is also dedicated to community sustainability. Through its partnerships with civic, political, business, and religious leaders, MI provides broad-based support to parents and families in the larger community, many of which have students enrolled in the MI school programs. Given its wide-ranging attention to job placement skills, GED classes, and day laborer support, MI has fashioned itself as an invaluable resource designed to support not only students, but also their families and the community at large.

The Multicultural Institute has changed the lives of many of its constituents, and is challenged to collect evidence and demonstrate the success of its programs to both internal and external stakeholders. The focus of this project was to gather programmatic information regarding the impact of the MAS program. Although the efforts of MI have appeared successful, the program struggles to document its impact on participants and families.

In the past the program administered surveys to parents, however this year they chose to engage in a qualitative approach to gather more in depth information regarding the parents' perceptions of their program. In conversation with Father Rigo, rather than individual interviews, it was decided to hold parent focus groups to spark interchange among the parents as well.

### **Literature Review**

Many studies have looked at the methodologies used by successful after-school programs. This review examines challenges inherent in conducting research on after-school programs, aspects of successful after-school programs, programs focused on enhancing reading skills, and creative arts programs. While these studies examine programs with a variety of focal points, this paper focuses specifically on one academically based program.

### **Research Challenges**

Conducting research with after-school programs can present a number of unique challenges. Bender, Brisson, Jenson, Forrest-Bank, Lopez, and Yoder (2011) explain that both the large amount of funding available and the perceived need for after-school programs has created a demand for research evaluating the effectiveness of such programs. In this study the authors use the findings from five field studies to highlight the challenges facing researchers conducting studies with after-school programs (Bender et al., 2011). Three common challenges

emerged: small sample sizes, the ability to measure relevant change, and threats to internal validity.

Youth participation in after-school programs is voluntary and thus there is no way to ensure consistent participation on the part of the student. The authors recommend using the program staff to engage in recruitment efforts and maintain the participation of the students being studied. The second potential challenge identified was the difficulty in measuring relevant change. Bender et al. recommend carefully selecting the instruments used to measure change and aligning those measures closely with the interventions actually being provided by the after-school program (2011). The third potential challenge, internal validity, is also based in the voluntary nature of after-school programs. Because there are many variables and students have the potential to self select their level of participation, the authors suggest using experimental or quasi-experimental studies when determining the effectiveness of an after-school program. In terms of our current research, the fact that our participants are self-selected may indeed influence the validity of the conclusions we can draw.

### **After-School Programs**

Looking specifically at how after-school programs can effectively support students, Fleming (2005) conducted research on *Two Together, Inc.*, an after-school tutoring program based out of Albany, New York. At the time of the study, *Two Together* provided tutoring services to 49 students in grades 2 -6, and also had a supplementary program for 25 kindergarteners. The tutors for the program were drawn from a local high school, a school of law, and the community (2005).

The research was focused on examining the program to identify which elements contributed to the improvements in the reading ability of the students, and which aspects of the

program would be critical for a successful replication. Over the course of four months, the researcher conducted on-site observations; reviewed records, reports, and self-reports completed by the staff; and facilitated in-depth interviews with key staff members as well as less formal conversations with the tutees and parents (Fleming, 2005).

Relationships between tutors and students—particularly the level of individual attention—was key to the success of the program. The researcher identified a key success element of the program was the relationship between the tutor and the student. *Two Together's* 2003 annual report noted that 59% of their students who had been two or more years behind in their grade level for reading skills at the beginning of the academic year ended the year at least a grade level above. Furthermore, there was a strong correlation between regular attendance and academic improvement (Fleming, 2005). Finally, to maintain the momentum of improvement during the summer months, *Two Together* also provides two summer programs. (This is similar to MI's Youth Writing Festival.) Although the level of parental involvement in the program was an identified strength, the support provided by the program to the parents could have been improved.

In addition to providing assistance to students in general, some after-school programs are focused on specific groups of students in need of support. As part of an examination of ways to motivate and improve Hispanic students' academic achievement, Aspiazu, Bauer and Spillet (1998) explored the creation of a Hispanic education center and the impact it had on students' academic prowess. The Oakwood Family Education Center is a community-based education center founded on the principles of liberation theology, which is a change strategy used to improve educational outcomes of students through empowerment and community involvement (Aspiazu et al., 1998). Participants in the study consisted of 16 Hispanic parents, largely

immigrants from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. This qualitative study involved open-ended in-depth interviews conducted in Spanish because participants were not proficient in English.

Aspiazu et al. (1998) emphasized the parents supported the creation of the center because they recognized the benefits of the tutoring for their student's academic success. They referred to the center as their "La Escuelita" because they saw it as a small, safe place where they could send their children that would feel similar to how they felt at their home. In addition, the families felt that their children's understanding and completing their homework was essential because it helped to improve their grades, discipline, attitude, and self-confidence (Aspiazu et al., 1998). Also, parents felt their children's academic improvements were associated with the nurture and care the center provided to each student.

### **Reading Support**

Because one of the areas of focus of the MAS program is reading improvement it is also important to look at research surrounding after-school programs and reading achievement. The 2011 study by Nelson-Royes and Reglin qualitatively assessed the reading component of an after-school tutoring program. The students involved in this study were all eighth graders and half of the students were from low-income homes. Each of the educators from the tutoring facility had between five and ten years of teaching experience. This descriptive-interview study explored three research questions: What led to the reading program being implemented, was the program being implemented with fidelity, and what specific strategies were helping to improve students' reading abilities?

Nelson-Royes and Reglin (2011) found that both the participants and the organization itself shared the need for a reading program. Because of this need, a specific reading program

was started for the students. Nelson-Royes and Reglin (2011) determined that four specific areas contributed to the success of the program: encouraging students to practice, hiring the best teachers, setting high expectations, and challenging students to complete homework, study and ask questions. The researchers also examined the fidelity with which the program was being taught from the perspectives of the participants and subsequently confirmed by their own observations (Nelson-Royes & Reglin, 2011).

The “It Takes a Village” Project (Village Project) was developed to improve the reading achievement and levels of motivation via one-to-one tutoring for struggling readers, and included family involvement. The researchers identified what families perceived as the impact of the Village Project, and what motivated them to continue to participate. As many of the parents of MAS scholars are actively involved in the MI community, it is beneficial to gain the parents’ insight of the perceived impact of other tutorial programs. The theoretical framework applied by Rattigan-Rohr, et al. (2014) was that of Bronfenbrenner (1986) who argued that a critical factor in the development of a child is the involvement of their family.

The researchers conducted a mixed method study with 68 students and 50 family members. The definition of “family” in this study included parents, guardians, grandparents, aunts, and siblings and participation by family members was a requirement. These family members attended the project and also followed through with the students at home (Rattigan-Rohr, et al., 2014). The first phase of the study consisted of a survey with Likert-scale items as well as open-ended questions. The surveys were administered in both English and in Spanish. Descriptive statistics were drawn from the quantitative survey data. The qualitative data were analyzed for themes, and interviews were also conducted with select parents. In an effort to have a better understanding of the families’ perspectives, the researchers selected four parents with



varying levels of educational and work experience. They selected a Spanish and an English-speaking parent with high-education level, and a Spanish and an English speaking parent with low-education level.

The findings from the quantitative data noted a high level of positive feedback from the families involved in the study. The qualitative results indicated the parents continued the tutoring from the Village Project in the home, and they were appreciative of the one-on-one tutoring. The feedback from the participants regarding areas for improvement focused on increasing the length of the program (Rattigan-Rohr, et al., 2014). The parents' continued involvement in the program was motivated by their satisfaction with their students' positive results and appreciation for their own ongoing learning opportunities (Rattigan-Rohr, et al., 2014).

### **Creative Arts**

Although many studies have focused on after school programs, much of the research has focused on the structural aspects of the program (i.e., the buildings, resources, staffing, etc.) More research needs to be done on the impact of arts-based programs, but this has proved problematic given the dearth of such programs (Wright, John, Alaggia, Duku, & Morton, 2008). Yet, there is evidence that artistic-based programs are effective and are critical to improving educational outcomes for students (Wright et al., 2014).

In 2014, Wright et al. studied the long-term effects of a structured arts program geared towards under-privileged Canadian youth, many of whom came from low-income, Aboriginal/native communities across Canada. The program, dubbed the National Arts and Youth Development Program (NAYDP), had specific psychosocial objectives. For example, one of the goals of the program was to determine whether the students participating in the program

demonstrated higher emotional intelligence as a result of their attendance in the program (Wright et al., 2014).

In all, 32 students completed the NAYDP study. The students were selected based on their attendance rates; those students who had above average attendance became part of the pool from which the study sample was selected. Students were interviewed using the long-interview method, which relied on general categorical questions and secondary questions within each grouping. For example, the Wright et al., (2014) asked general questions about the popularity of the art program, which may have led to more detailed questions about the instructors within the program. Important themes were identified in the post-interview analysis.

Those students who participated in the arts program not only noted positive school engagement, but many reported a reduction in verbal or physical aggression (Wright et al., 2014). The arts program provided an opportunity for the students to engage their instructors in a different way. As a result, many of the students found the staff to be “lots of fun” or “really nice” and relatable (Wright et al., p. 143). The students in the study expressed positive feelings about the program and seemed to be more optimistic about their future aspirations. This research suggests an important role for creative writing programs that needs to be further explored.

In closing, researchers have identified and highlighted many of the challenges and opportunities present in delivering and researching effect after-school programs. Many strategies can be used to develop effective programs. Some possibilities include emphasizing tutor and student relationships as well as one-on-one tutoring, homework and reading support, parent involvement, and the inclusion of the arts. Potential challenges for those desiring to conduct research in partnership with after-school programs include small sample sizes, collecting relevant data, and the internal validity of the study.

### **Problem Statement**

While the Multicultural Institute is confident that its programs have benefitted the students and families that it serves, little formal evidence has been collected to gauge the actual reaction of families to the MI programs. Although MI has collected anecdotal and survey data from program participants the current study was designed to delve more deeply into parents' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

As a result, the objective for this research project was to gather parental perception of the Multicultural Institute programs that their children attended. Our research question was: How do parents describe their family's experiences with the Multicultural Institute student programs?

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

By improving childrens' educational outcomes the Multicultural Institute seeks to also to transform families and communities. Therefore, the relationships that MI builds are not only with the children who attend their programs, but also with their families. Whereas the earlier quantitative study developed survey instruments for examining the opinions and perceptions of MAS *students*, the focus for this study were the perceptions of the *parents* of the students, in order to get a more comprehensive view of the impact of MAS in the larger community. The research team believed that the parent stakeholders could illuminate MI's standing in the community beyond its core constituents.

### **Methodology**

To obtain the data, we used a focus-group model to interview MAS parents from the local community. We first drafted an introductory letter to the parents in the community describing the nature and purpose of the study. Working with staff from MI, we were able to contact and

identify close to 20 parents who were interested in discussing their experience with MAS. Of those 20 who expresses initial interest, roughly a dozen parents agreed to participate in the focus group.

### **Interviewers**

The research team was a diverse group of doctoral graduate students enrolled in Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California. Two of the researchers were long-tenured K-12 educators, while the other two researchers worked in the corporate arena--a learning and development professional and a management consultant. The team was equally split between men and women. Two of the researchers were African-American (one male, one female), one was Latina, and one was White or European-American (male).

### **Setting**

We conducted the focus group interviews at the MI headquarters in Berkeley, California. The interviews were held on a Saturday morning in order to accommodate the schedules of the parents, many of whom worked during the weekdays. The parents who attended the interviews did so voluntarily after MI made a general solicitation to the parent population.

### **Focus Group Design**

Given that focus group interviews get their richness from the collective conversation among the interviewees, the team agreed that it would be much easier to generate free-flowing dialogue if the larger pool of potential interviewees was divided into two smaller groups. Ultimately, the two focus groups consisted of six and seven parents each, the majority of whom were women. Parents were assigned to each group randomly, although a majority of the parents in Group A consisted of those who arrived early.

The interview teams consisted of two interviewers each, with one person in each group possessing strong Spanish-language skills. The interview team for Group A was all male, and the interview team for Group B was all female. Each of the focus group sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes.

### **Participants**

The thirteen participants in the study were parents of school-age children who were currently or formerly enrolled in the MAS or YWF programs at the Multicultural institute. One group contained one male and five female participants, while the second group contained two male and five female participants. Although we had hoped for greater gender balance in each group, that was beyond our control.

### **Transcription and Coding**

Interviews were transcribed either by one of the researchers or a professional transcription service and then checked for accuracy. Our coding approach was aligned with Saldana's (2011) "thematic coding." The overarching themes were labeled as "primary themes," and any ideas that supported those primary themes were named "secondary themes."

Overall, we identified twelve primary themes, and dozens of supporting themes that reinforced the critical factors observed in the focus group sessions. The remaining themes were discussed to determine whether they were relevant to the research study. Surprisingly, the group was aligned in determining which themes were preeminent based on the research, but the researchers also took additional time to identify which themes were not as significant as some of the others. For example, the research team conceded that based on the qualitative data, parental involvement within the schools was not impacted by the after-school programs. The researchers also noted when certain data points seemed idiosyncratic and were only offered or supported by

one interviewee. We ultimately created a matrix to capture the most relevant themes. and painted a detailed picture of the data that was uncovered.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

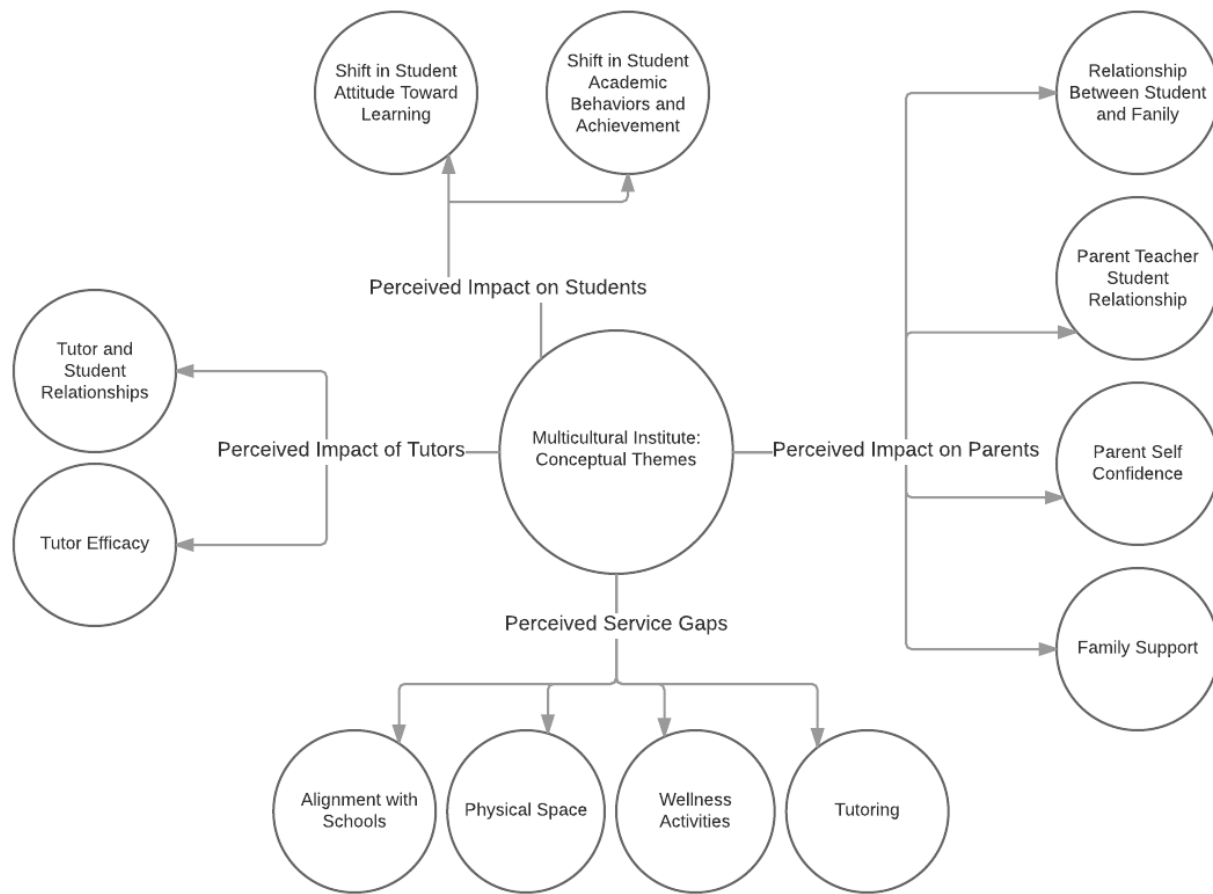
We assumed that the participants in the focus group would be able to clearly and accurately articulate their experiences and the experiences of their children with regards to the programs offered by the Multicultural Institute. In addition, we assumed that there are some positive benefits to the students and families from participation in the tutoring programs offered by the Multicultural Institute.

The small sample size of parents who participated in this study was a limitation. Further, the thirteen parents who attended the focus groups were not representative of the total MI parent population. Those parents who chose to be interviewed were more accessible than those who could not attend. Further, those parents who chose to attend may have had a more vested interest in seeing MI succeed and may have been less objective in their assessment of the MAS program than those parents who were absent.

Additionally, although our interview teams had Spanish speakers, the overall level of their Spanish was intermediate, which meant that each team had to rely intermittently on an interpreter to translate various elements of the responses. As a result, there were times when the translators edited the responses or paraphrased them, thus changing some of the reported content. Moreover, the time that it took to translate the questions posed and the answers given reduced the time for further inquiry during the focus group sessions. Also, the fact that the interpreters were MI employees may have also made it difficult for the interviewees to be completely candid about the efficacy of the student programs. That said, we made every effort to ensure that the responses we coded were accurate and authentic.

**Discussion of Key Themes**

The attitude of our focus group participants toward the Multicultural Institute and its associated programs was overwhelmingly positive. The parents expressed both their appreciation and commitment to the programs in a multitude of ways. Four major themes emerged: how the parents saw the program’s impact on their children; how they felt about the tutors; how they experienced their families, as a whole, in relation to the program; and areas where they saw possibilities for change.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual map of themes identified in through thematic analysis. The participants in this study were all parents of students who participated in the MAS and YWF programs.

### **Perceived Impact on Students**

Both the MAS program and the Youth Writing Festival focus on supporting students' academic growth. During the interviews, the parents were asked to describe changes they saw in their students after participating in the programs at the Multicultural Institute. The responses from the parents were enthusiastic and to the person, showed overwhelming support for the programs. The parents saw significant and meaningful changes in both their students' attitudes toward learning as well as their academic behaviors.

**Shift in student attitudes toward learning.** All of the parents interviewed recognized an improvement in their students' academic scores after participation in the MAS program; more importantly, found that parents also recognized a change in their students' attitudes toward learning. These ranged from a stronger desire to do well in school to aspirations for a higher education.

Beyond just basic academic improvement many parents saw other changes as well. Ricardo explained that his son, "was very introverted and now he is a lot more social." He was even more excited about the changes he saw in his daughter: "Before she would just want to finish homework and that was it. Now she actually aspires to do a lot more and reach the A plus." He was excited to see that after participating in the programs at MI she saw school not just as something she had to do but something at which she could excel.

Fabiola saw a different change in her daughter's attitude. While she too recognized a change in her daughter's academic performance, she also saw a change in how her daughter approached problems. "Before, if she make[s] a mistake, she was shy or she [didn't] want to talk about it and now she [says], 'Okay, I make a mistake, but I learn from it.'" Fabiola attributed



this change to help that her daughter received from the tutors as part of the program. In addition, Fabiola also saw changes in her son's attitude toward school:

Alfredo he was behind on writing and reading and [now] he is much better. Not [just] improving on the subjects, he is willing to go to university. That is the most important thing. The tutors encourage him to go to university. That's priceless.

These changes that the parents recognize in their children are something that they truly considered, as Fabiola said, "priceless." The MAS program and the Youth Writing Festival provide the students with academic support, but both programs also help them to change their attitudes about learning in a positive way. From supporting and encouraging the students desire to go to college, to helping students to believe that success is something that they can achieve, these programs are viewed as something truly valuable by the parents.

**Shift in student academic behaviors and achievement.** Besides a change in attitude about learning, parents saw a positive shift in the students' behaviors with regards to academics as well as increased academic achievement. Before participating in the MI programs students often felt discouraged or disheartened by their lack of success in school. After participating in the MAS and Youth Writing Festival, parents recognized a change in how their students succeeded in school and chose to spend their time in the MI programs rather than other activities.

One of the participants explained about how her daughter struggled in school prior to her participating in the MAS program:

[I]t used, it used to be harder [for Brenda] to understand math for example... and now it's not as difficult anymore. [I] just had parent conferences and all of [my] kids are doing really well especially in comprehension and reading. Which is one of the things they were struggling with.

Before coming to MAS it was difficult for students to understand the schoolwork and they were reluctant to get help. However, after coming to MAS, the students saw their grades improve and took on a more active role in their learning.

Lola explained how reluctant her children were when she first tried to get them to attend MAS. When she tried to get her nephew to attend the Youth Writing Festival he begged and pleaded not to go: “‘No I don’t want to go, I don’t want to go.’ [The] next morning he was at my house and he was [still] like, ‘I don’t want to go, [auntie]. I don’t want to go.’” However, after getting her children to try the programs at MI, she observed their behavior change. Now Lola’s children are so happy with the programs at MI and how they help with school, that they choose MAS over other activities because they see how important it is:

[T]hey said it's going to be tough because they want to join soccer but they don't want to leave MAS. So here we are and like I said, they love the program and they want to go to MAS and they want to go to soccer. They said, “Well we're going to do MAS and then we're going to do soccer after.”

Rafael also sees his children choosing MAS over other activities. When he gives his children a choice between tutoring or soccer, they choose tutoring, even offering up alternatives so they don't miss out on the opportunity to learn: “Maybe we can go running after tutoring, okay?” Both parents saw this change in how their children prioritized learning as a significant positive shift in their behavior.

After participating in the programs at MI, parents saw changes in how their children completed school assignments. Fabiola described how her children now approach completing their schoolwork and participating in the MAS program: “[her children] would say, ‘Okay this is our routine from Monday to Thursday we have to do this. We need to finish our homework; we

need to do this.” Fabiola’s children now plan around MAS and place schoolwork ahead of other enrichment activities. Ricardo also saw a change in how his son approached his schoolwork: “Alfredo is very independent when it comes to homework.” He sees how Alfredo now completes the work on his own where before it would have taken more outside direction and encouragement.

All of these shifts in behavior are perceived by the parents as having a positive effect on the academic success of the students. The prioritization of learning over extracurricular activities and the importance the students place on completing their work and attending the program are significant changes that the parents viewed as playing an important role in improving academic performance. The parents see how much their children have grown in their time with MI and they are very grateful for the programs and services offered.

### **Perceived Impact of Tutors**

The tutors in the MAS program are a critical component in the daily operations of the after-school program. Although there were not any questions specifically asked about the tutors during the focus group, comments regarding the relationship between the students and the tutors, their efficacy, and opportunities for improvement with the scheduling process were topics that repeatedly arose within both groups during the interviews.

**Tutor and student relationships.** The parents’ perception of the relationships between the students and the tutors leaned towards a positive relationship that influenced the students both academically and at a personal level. When speaking of his son, Ivan, Jorge stated, “... [Ivan] has had great communication with the tutors now and that has really helped Ivan, his son, to improve.” Jorge noted that there is still room for improvement and growth with Ivan, but they like the one-on-one tutoring relationship.

Lola mentioned she felt the program at MI was going to be “another tutoring program, but no. This program helped him a lot.” Lola shared the story of how her son had been diagnosed with dyslexia, and his tutor had provided support during this time. She mentioned her son’s tutor, Eric, and the program, “didn’t help him only with academic[s], but personally.” Lola proceeded to express her gratitude for the program and the pride she has with son’s achievements, and everyone in the program.

As previously mentioned with the relationship between the students and the parents, the student/tutor relationship has been described as an overall positive aspect of MI’s program.

**Tutor efficacy.** The majority of the feedback provided during the focus groups focused upon what the parents saw as a high level of tutor efficacy. Many comments centered on the importance of the one-on-one time the students have with the tutors. In speaking of the performance of the tutor, Jorge noted that,

[Jorge] has noticed that one-on-one tutoring is very beneficial to the student and the tutors because then he [the tutor] is able to find the need whether it’d be math, literacy, and whatever the case may be. And that way they [the tutors] can help better.

In addition to the feedback provided about the benefits of one-on-one tutoring, Maria spoke of how she appreciated the fact the tutors were from a university because it allowed her child to have a role model who attends college. She commented, “[it] makes them aspire to be that [college student]...and [it is] motivation for them...it’s very important.” Fabiola reiterated the point with her statement about her son, “[he] is motivated to go to college to finish university because of the tutor’s comments, because of the tutor’s motivation.” Many of the parents of the students do not have a college education, and the tutors at MAS are able to support the goal of attending a university by their example.

### **Perceived Impact on Parents**

The MAS program is designed to assist students in achieving academically. During the parent interviews it was discovered through analysis, there is a perceived impact the program has on the parents of student who participate.

**Relationship between students and parents.** The shift in both attitude and behavior on the part of the students had an additional impact on the families of those participating in the MAS programs. Several parents recognized a change in how they related with their children with respect to schoolwork. They associated this struggle to complete schoolwork as something that was shared by the students and the family. Ricardo recalled how he felt earlier when he had tried to help his son, “[T]hey would get big packets of homework and it was very frustrating that [my wife and I] couldn't help him with all these homework assignment[s].” Often his family would be, “up until 8:00 or 9:00pm trying to help [his daughter] finish her homework.” This presented an ongoing challenge for not just the student, but also the entire family.

Pamela also explained how she and her daughter, “would get angry with each other.” She goes on to say how they, “would end up fighting because [we] were frustrated because [we] didn't understand the homework.” The help their children receive in the MAS program has reduced the challenges both Ricardo and Pamela face at home and improved the relationship with their families.

Rafael also described the struggles he faced at home with his children before they began the MAS program.

I used to have a hard time with my kids because I don't know how to help them. I didn't know, I didn't know the answer. It was very hard and there [were] some argument[s]

going on and some screaming going on... Now it's love. It's amazing. It changed my life completely.

He went on to explain how the MAS program, "changed everything; my relationship with my family--big, big turn[around]. I feel great." The MAS program provided the support he and his children needed to improve not only their academics, but also their relationship at home.

In addition to helping the families avoid the everyday struggle of arguing over homework, Lorena explained how in her case the staff at the MAS program was able to help out with sibling discord between her children:

[T]he kids were fighting on the way to the program and they both were very angry at each other, screaming and yelling and not being good siblings to each other... [I] arrived and told Adan, the site coordinator... what the situation was and he said, "It's okay, I'll talk to them." [W]hen I went to pick them up they were both very happy and they were hugging each other. They were best friends and [I] saw that Adan really gave them that talk and had a conversation with them and that really helped.

The programs at the Multicultural institute not only helped to improve the family's' relationships with each other surrounding academic struggles, but also with personal challenges as well.

**Parental Self-Confidence.** The parents in the interviews exuded a level of confidence. All of them were fluent Spanish speakers and a few attempted to speak in English during parts of the interview which may have indicated an increased level of comfort with us as interviewers and their own self-confidence. Jorge spoke fluently in English and then seemed to naturally return to Spanish when he perceived his colleagues may not be following the discussion.

In addition, the MAS staff seemed to contribute to the parents increased self-confidence to overcome language barriers beyond the focus group. It appeared the families were able to

discuss concerns with MI staff and then take the advice received to talk with the school when needed. Lola a parent with a student diagnosed with dyslexia recalls when she heard the devastating news. She stated, “When I had the IEP [...] I didn’t know what dyslexia [was], they just [told] us. I went to the internet, I searched and I went to Merced [and told her] I’m going to cry now. My son was diagnosed with dyslexia. She [told] me that it’s ok and don’t worry.” The parent’s self-confidence was evident through her determination to find out what dyslexia was independently. She did not let her being upset cause her to stop or be defeated.

It also seemed that parents were able to better balance their work and domestic lives since MAS is working with their children. Rafael speaks about his challenges balancing his life before receiving support from the MAS program. He states, “I work long hours and I wanted to basically quit my job so I can be there [for my kids] 100% but [if I] quit my job and then who’s going to support us? It was very hard.” Rafael’s was concerned about his children’s academic success until he found MAS. This helped him to be self-confident and assured that he did not have to quit his job to ensure they were doing well in school because he now had the support of the program.

**Familial Support.** Additionally, the parents of MAS felt the program was a second family. This familial connection provided them with hope and the needed support they sought. Lola stated she feels “they’re in a family... Merced is like the second mom. ‘Hola mi vida, hola mi amore! [Hello my life, hello my love!]’” She felt this greeting helped to open up the hearts of the children and families. The MAS program seemed to provide a sort of safety net for the parents. A place where they felt a strong family connection and could have the assurance of a safe place to seek support and help anytime they needed it regardless of the situation of circumstances they were facing. Rafael another parent stated, “This program has done that for us.

It has opened a door of hope.” The parents were very thankful to all members of this support group they found in MAS.

**Parental-Teacher-Student Relationships.** The MAS program encouraged parental involvement and its importance in schools. The group of parents that were interviewed all seemed very involved in their student’s education. When asked about the MAS programs impact on parent relationship with the teachers, Jorge stated, “I’m assuming that all the parents in here have great relationships with teachers because I have seen some of the moms in the PTA meetings or volunteering because the communication is already there.” Lorena the parent with the student who has dyslexia stated, “[The program] helped in a way that now I ask the teacher to let her know how my child is doing because... [my kids] are in a program and I want to let the tutor know what they can help them with.” The perception from the interviews is the MAS parents are involved and ensure they maintain a relationship with the teachers on an ongoing basis to ensure their children are academically successful.

### **Perceived Service Gaps**

During the focus group interview, one of our final questions was: “Where do you see the Multicultural Institute 20 years from now?” Another question posed to the parents was: “What other support can MAS provide to your children?” The responses seemed to fall into four overarching categories related to tutoring, activities, physical space, and partnership with the schools.

**Tutors.** While the majority of the remarks regarding the tutors were positive, the parents provided feedback pertaining to the disruption due to the scheduling of the tutors, whose college class schedules were not coordinated with their children’s school schedules. As one result, parents mentioned that their children sometimes develop a bond with a tutor who has to leave



mid-year. [At this point in the interview the interpreter interjected to explain the mismatch with scheduling. “Cal and Saint Mary’s schedules are different than that of the City of Berkeley and the City of Richmond. It doesn’t always match, but we can try.” This difference in schedules at times breaks the continuity of the development time a tutor and a student have together.

Another area of parents’ concern regarding tutors focused on how many tutors were on hand in the various facilities and how that might impact their effectiveness. Jorge made the comment that, “If a tutor had less kids to worry about, or one-on-one [time], [he or she] wouldn’t be able to give my son better tactics or tips on how to solve word problems and help him with his literacy.” To Jorge, it was very important to be able to maintain the tutor-to-group ratio that provided ample opportunities for the individualized tutoring his son needs. Lola also emphasized this point, when asked how MAS could provide anything else for their students. She remarked, “...more tutors, like in my case to have a one-on-one tutor.” The parents see the value in the time their children spend one-on-one with the tutors in both locations, when the opportunity to do so presents itself.

**Wellness activities.** Parents also expressed parents’ a desire for MI to provide more varied activities, beyond specific skill development. Rafael mentioned that he would “like to see a running track...and a swimming pool, so [that] after tutoring, [the students] can do a couple of hours and exercise.” Besides recreational activities, Lola shared that she would like to see more creative programs, perhaps related to, “maybe art, music.”

**Classroom space.** Rather than wellness activities, other parents called for more classroom space at MI. For example, Erica mentioned the need for additional space at the Berkeley location: “We’re so lucky that black parents they offer us two classrooms. [Our] student[s] will feel more comfortable if they have their own space...” Lola reiterated that she

would like to see “a bigger space [in Richmond] maybe with classroom.” Rafael also noted “it would be nice to have our space” and that he “would like to see bigger...classrooms” at MI.

**Alignment with teachers.** Additionally, the parents believed that MI could do a better job in communicating with the teachers to make sure there was alignment with respect to the students’ educational needs. Specifically, Rafael said that he would like the tutors at MI “to get connected with the teachers...and to ask them what are the weaknesses so they [tutors] can work on that [with the students].” Meanwhile, Jorge mentioned that he would like to see “intervention support” for the students to help understand why certain homework is being assigned. Elaborating further, Jorge believed that MI could work with the parents in “keeping [the students] on the level when...Common Core is not helping them [students] improve.”

Although several parents stated that they believed that MI did everything well, the data showed that when the parents were specifically asked to share their ideas, they believed that MI could improve its service delivery by offering more wellness activities, overcoming its physical limitations, and working more closely with the schools to ensure educational alignment.

### **Discussion**

The analysis of the transcripts clearly indicates overwhelming support for the programs at the Multicultural Institute on the part of the parents of the participants. The parents who participated in our focus groups clearly viewed both the MAS program and the Youth Writing Festival as filling an important gap in their children’s learning. While there are several areas where the parents felt that MI might have additional opportunities to serve the students and families, they clearly saw the overall impact of the program on their children to be significant and meaningful.

Many of the parents felt strongly that the programs offered by the Multicultural institute were essential to their students' continued success. They felt these programs filled a need resulting from a lack of attention in the public schools or an inability on their own part to provide the support necessary for their students to succeed.

Although the parents believed the Multicultural Institute has been influential in their children's educational and psychosocial development, the parents also believed that MI could augment its current programming in several key areas. For example, several parents discussed the opportunity for holistic activities related to physical and artistic development. MI may want to conduct future research to outline the scope of what those new and supplemental activities may be.

Further, a few parents also believed that MI could benefit from additional classroom space. Not only did the parents mention the need for dedicated classroom space in Berkeley, they also mentioned the need for MI to have its own facilities in satellite locations such as Richmond so the students would be able to utilize MI resources without undue restriction.

Additionally, parents expressed concerns regarding the number of tutors available in the Richmond location. All families valued the tutor to student relationship and felt with limited tutors, students did not receive the one-to-one support they were afforded in the past. The parents noticed the decreased support students received because the tutors were required to work with a larger group of students and could not provide the focused attention they felt their students needed.

Finally, the parents also perceived a need for greater synchronicity between the schools and MI to ensure greater student success. There were several instances throughout the discussions where the parents thought there was an opportunity for MI to work more closely with

the schools to coordinate instructional support activities. Although the parents perceived that MI had been instrumental in working with their children, the parents still recognized the need to collaborate with the schools in a strategic way in order to ensure academic success.

Despite these suggestions, the parents were very complimentary of MI. As such, it should be noted that the parents did not offer insights because they believed that MI was wholly deficient or inadequate. To the contrary, the parents appeared to make recommendations because they believed that MI was so powerful that it could and can do so much more.

And yet, perhaps because of the growing potential of MI, some parents shared some anxiety that MI programs would be jeopardized or that they were under assault by hostile, outside forces. One parent seemed to think that the success of the Multicultural Institute might somehow put the program in danger of being shut down. It was not clear in the conversations what the root of this perception was, but it may prove valuable to investigate this further to see if this particular parent's views were those of an outlier, or this perception is something that is shared by other families and is not surfacing at this time.

Despite their individual concerns and/or wishes, all of the parents wanted to ensure that MAS would survive well into the future. Although the one parent mentioned above suggested that the schools were at odds with the MAS program, all the parents stressed their appreciation for the program. Notably, they felt that the most important way that MAS could grow and evolve is by ensuring that program would continue indefinitely.

In summary, the parents' overall perceptions are that the MAS program is incredibly valuable and has a positive effect on the education and growth of their children. They appreciate the family atmosphere and wide-ranging support offered by MI and they truly see these programs as a lifeline for both their students and their families.

### **Recommendations**

Throughout the research process, we identified areas that we would approach differently if we were to conduct this study again or if we were to commission similar studies in the future. In addition, we recognized several opportunities for further investigation and study of different elements of the Multicultural Institute's programs and services. These may constitute opportunities for future research by other community partners, or by staff or stakeholders within the organization itself.

#### **Research Recommendations**

As mentioned earlier in the Limitations section of this report, one of the aspects of the research process that we would handle differently in future studies is the use of translators. Particularly for a qualitative study where interviewing helps form the foundation of the research, it is important that researchers speak the primary language of the participants. However, because the MI stakeholders primarily speak Spanish, we chose to use translators to make good use of the data. While our translators certainly made every effort to be unbiased and faithfully translate the responses of the focus group participants, some phrases or sentiments did not translate well from Spanish to English. Further, in their efforts to paraphrase or condense long passages, there were occasions when the translation was more nearly a reinterpretation. Also, given that the translators were employees of MI, it is conceivable that the participants' representations were affected by their own perceptions and perhaps the unconscious desire to have their workplace presented in the best light. In future research, it would be advisable to use translators from an outside agency if a translator has to be used.

Further, because the sample was self-selected, there is no way to determine how well they represent the wider parental community associated with MI. Moreover, the majority of our participants were female. In future studies, we may want to seek a more diverse sample group.

All of the parents all had some level of interaction with the programs at MI, but there was not a lot of differentiation in the sample based on program enrollment. Most of the parents were familiar only with MAS or the Youth Writing Festival. We also failed to probe the extent to which the participants had experience with other programs offered at MI. In hindsight, we could have done more research about our community partner to understand MI's full compliment of programs, or clarified the scope of our inquiry beforehand with MI to ensure that our questions covered greater territory. The research question itself could have been broader, also.

After reviewing the transcripts, it was clear to us that we missed several opportunities for more nuanced or probative questions. This could be due, in part, to the relative inexperience of the researchers in directing a focus group. In order to keep the conversation flowing and to make it inclusive, we often-times found ourselves directing the conversation in a way that did not allow for follow-up. There were also instances where a few individuals dominated the conversation, limiting other parents' participation. As we continue to develop as researchers and hone our interviewing skills, we will need to become more adept at limiting and redirecting vocal participants while creating a forum for authentic expression.

Subsequently, we generated a list of questions that we wished we would have asked, but no longer had the opportunity to do so. While circumstances did not permit us to consider organizing a follow-up focus group session, had there been enough time to do so, we may have considered follow-up with specific participants via individual interviews.

Our biggest challenge as researchers came during the coding process. Our initial coding process lacked the specificity and detail needed to demonstrate a logical progression from the conversational topics we uncovered in the transcripts to the primary themes that became the backbone of our findings. We belatedly recognized the full meaning and demand of the audit trail. In future researches, we will more explicitly describe the milestones in our thinking as the coding process unfolds, thus enabling us to more cogently determine the thematic threads

### **Organizational Recommendations**

Over the course of this research process, we recognized several opportunities for study that fell outside of the scope of this project, including opportunities for the further investigation of student perceptions of the programs at MI, as well as the collection and analysis of academic data concerning individual student achievement. In addition to those research opportunities, the Multicultural Institute may find it valuable to discuss some of the perceived service gaps outlined above.

This project focused solely on the perceptions of parents and their interactions with the programs at the Multicultural Institute. This leaves a great opportunity to further study the perceptions of the student participants. It may be valuable to the organization to compare the perceptions of parents and students. Furthermore, while the parents provided anecdotal evidence of their students' academic improvement, it would be extremely valuable to seek quantitative data on student academic performance. That type of research could have a significant impact above and beyond what was envisioned with our study.

Finally, while the parents were hesitant to be critical of MI, their expressed desire to see more collaboration between the schools and MI, as well as an expanded focus on the personal wellness of the students, appear to be fertile areas for further discussion within the organization.

Although the addition of more tutors and the procurement of additional space will provide a challenge for the organization, those goals are worth considering when looking at the overall growth and development of the programs.

We hope the recommendations provided above serve to inform future researchers as well as the stakeholders within the Multicultural Institute. Our overall perception of the organization is overwhelmingly positive: the parents seemed humbled by the level of commitment and sense of community created by the staff. We hope, like the participants in the focus groups, that this information will be useful in expanding and enhancing the programs offered at the Multicultural Institute.



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### Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Today, we are going to conduct a focus group with you pertaining to the MAS program. The purpose of the interview is to get your perspective and feedback regarding your student's participation in the MAS program.

**First, we are going to ask you about how you became involved with the MAS program.**

We understand that each of you have different reasons for wanting your child to participate in MAS.

1. Tell us about some of the circumstances that led you to enrolling your child in the MAS program? How did you learn about the program?
2. What expectations did you have for the MAS program when your first enrolled your student?

**Now, we'd like to get your feedback regarding the how the program has affected your student.**

As you know the MAS program is focused on improving the educational experience for students and families that participate in the program.

3. Tell us about how the MAS program affected the educational outcomes of your student?

We have a few more questions regarding outcomes.

- a) Tell us a little about how MAS impacts the level of parental involvement with your child's educational process?

**In addition, we would like to find out more about your students' perceptions of MAS and how the MAS program works with your student's school.**

An important part of the MAS program is how students feel in the program and connecting with the school your students attend.

4. Tell us about your student's perception of MAS?
5. Give us a few details about how the MAS program works with your child's school? How has MAS impacted your relationship with teachers?
  1. Describe some of the changes you've noticed in your child since he/she has started the MAS program?
    - a. How has MAS impacted your student's creative writing ability?
    - b. How has MAS enhanced your child's sense of cultural identity?

**The last questions we have are related to your own experiences and perceptions of the MAS program.**

Through our work with MAS we realize they are focused on students and pride themselves in the relationships they build with the parents to assist them in better serving each child.

1. Have you ever needed to contact the MAS program to ask questions or help your student?
  - a. Can you describe what that was like?
  - b. Is there anything that has kept you from contacting the MAS program?
    1. Because of MAS, do you feel you are more involved in your student's education?
1. What other support can MI provide to best serve your student?
1. In what ways could the MAS program improve?
1. What would you tell other parents of students at your school if they asked you about the MAS program?

Appendix B: Thematic Matrix

Initial Themes	Suggested Themes	Final Themes
<p>Increased self-esteem                      Stronger motivation to do well in school                      Boost in confidence                      Deeper resilience                      Increased college aspirations</p>	<p>Student Experience with MAS                      Impact of program on student                      Student Achievement</p>	<p>Shift in Student Attitudes towards school</p>
<p>More energy                      Greater self-motivation                      Better conflict resolution skills                      Willingness to attend MAS and study                      Independence                      Increased creativity</p>	<p>Student Experience with MAS                      Impact of program on student                      Student Achievement</p>	<p>Shift in Student Behaviors</p>
<p>Ability to overcome educational barriers and be involved in the student’s educational process                      Ability to overcome language barriers and be move involved in the student’s education                      Parents are better able to balance their work and domestic lives because of MAS                      Parents are better at time management since MI is able to work with their students</p>	<p>Impact of program on parents                      Parents relationship with MI                      Parental Impact</p>	<p>Parental self-confidence</p>

<p>Less discord at home</p> <p>Parents feel more connected to their children</p> <p>Parents see happier kids at home</p>	<p>Impact of program on parents</p> <p>Parents relationship with MI</p> <p>Parental Impact</p>	<p>Relationship between the student and the parent/Greater family stability</p>
<p>MI staff are seen as extended family</p> <p>MAS employees are welcoming</p> <p>MAS employees were very accommodating, assuring, and inviting when the parents inquired about the program</p> <p>The MI programs are cheaper than other after-school programs</p>	<p>Impact of program on parents</p> <p>Parents relationship with MI</p> <p>Parental Impact</p>	<p>MAS provides familial support</p>

<p>One-to-one one tutoring in some cases is impactful</p> <p>Tutors inspire the kids to think about college</p> <p>The tutors help motivate the kids to do better academically</p> <p>The tutors inspire the kids to help each other</p> <p>The tutors coach the kids on how to resolve conflicts peacefully</p>	<p>Tutor impact Tutor efficacy Sense of family Concern with Tutors</p>	<p>Tutor Efficacy/The Tutors Improve Student Confidence and Social Skills</p>
<p>The tutors build strong interpersonal bonds with the kids.</p> <p>The tutors serve as role models for the students.</p> <p>Because of the tutor-student relationship, some students return to MI as tutors themselves when they get older because they are eager to give back</p>	<p>Tutor impact Tutor efficacy Sense of family Concern with Tutors</p>	<p>The Tutors Create Strong &amp; Positive Relationships With the Students/The Tutors Serve As Role Models</p>

<p>MI has empowered parents to ask more questions of teachers regarding student achievement</p> <p>The parent relationship with the teachers has not changed.</p> <p>Parents do not feel that their involvement with the school board or the schools themselves has increased dramatically since their kids have been enrolled at MI.</p>	<p>MAS impact on teachers MAS relationship with teachers Outcome from MAS Impact with relationship with teachers</p>	<p>Parental-teacher/student relationship  (Not a strong theme)</p>
<p>MI should assign one specific tutor to each student instead of assigning multiple or random tutors</p> <p>MI should ensure that the tutoring is done on a 1-to-1 basis</p> <p>MI should hire more tutors and create more tutor support for students.</p> <p>There should be more 1-on-1 tutoring as opposed to group tutoring.</p> <p>MI should establish more reading time for the students.</p>	<p>Additional support requested Ways to improve MAS Concerns about the program's viability</p>	<p>Perception of MI service gaps - tutoring</p>

<p>There should be more programs geared towards physical exercise and wellness.</p> <p>The kids need more diverse activities related to creativity and wellness.</p>	<p>Additional support requested</p> <p>Ways to improve MAS</p> <p>Concerns about the program's viability</p>	<p>Perception of MI service gaps - wellness activities</p>
<p>MI needs to establish its own dedicated learning space in Richmond.</p>	<p>Additional support requested</p> <p>Ways to improve MAS</p> <p>Concerns about the program's viability</p>	<p>Perception of MI service gaps - physical space</p>
<p>MI should partner more with the schools to coordinate homework, interventions, and other after-school care</p> <p>MI should focus more on Common Core to understand the instruction students get at school.</p> <p>MI should look for ways to improve communication with the teachers</p>	<p>Additional support requested</p> <p>Ways to improve MAS</p> <p>Concerns about the program's viability</p>	<p>Perception of MI service gaps - educational alignment with schools</p>



Appendix C: Conceptual Map

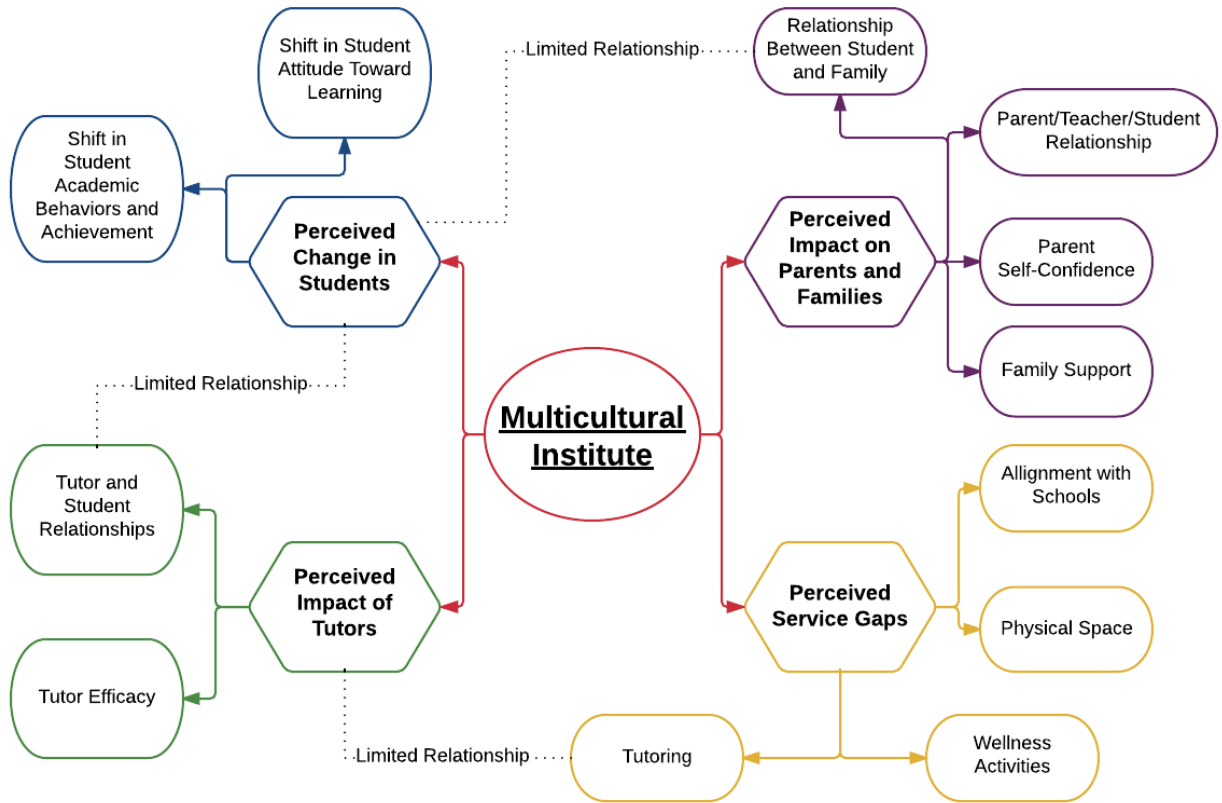


Figure C1. Conceptual Map showing the four major categories of themes derived from the thematic analysis. The individual themes are shown in relationship to their larger category. The limited relationship between certain themes and categories is also indicated.