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Community and School Collaborations: Tapping into Community Organizing Initiatives and Resources

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Unique perspectives for bicultural parent-community-school collaborations that may not exist in the more “traditional” conceptualizations of parent involvement in schools emerge from a community-organizing approach to educational reform and accountability (Hong, 2011; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Oakes & Rogers 2006; Olivos, 2006; Warren & Mapp, 2011). As opposed to the “more typical school-community partnerships, ... a community-organizing approach to school reform focuses on developing the relationships, leadership, and collective power of low-income parents and neighbors themselves to collaborate with and hold educators accountable for improving education in their communities” (Ishimaru, 2014b, p. 3).

A community-organizing approach does not rely on school officials to initiate discussions or to set priorities. Rather, a “bottom-up” process is often employed to develop agendas that address bicultural parent- and bicultural community-identified concerns and frustrations with local schools which are then acted upon from various fronts and using various strategies. Bicultural parents and community members draw resources and power from their collective social capital and work to address similar concerns as parents of children in under-performing and ethnically-diverse schools.

Bicultural individuals are those who come from, and often live in, working-class, primarily non-White communities in the United States. The term “bicultural” is used here to replace the term “minority” when possible. It is a term that acknowledges that students and parents of color are in many cases the “majority” in many schools (not the minority) yet they are still relatively politically disempowered from the “mainstream” (Darder, 2012). Biculturalism in this chapter also differs slightly from its popular usage in the 1970s which drew from child experimental psychology and cognitive studies to argue that non-White/non-majority children (e.g., Latino) often need to function and negotiate “two worlds,” therefore “biculturalism” was a viable and desirable educational outcome for them (Ramírez & Castañeda, 1974). My use of the term draws more from Darder’s

(2012) conceptualization of biculturalism and her recognition that biculturalism, in addition to being a way of functioning in two (or more) cultures, is also a “defense mechanism” that individuals (consciously and unconsciously) use to navigate and resist everyday forms of oppression (e.g., racism, etc.) and “cultural invasion” (e.g., forced assimilation, etc.). This biculturalism is unique to people of color (not experienced by White Americans) in that they must constantly navigate everyday forms of racism and negotiate their identities as non-White Americans.

For some readers, a bicultural community-centered approach to parent-community-school collaboration may bring to mind “the confrontational side of community organizing,” where parents of color “demand” changes or concessions from equally frustrated and disempowered educators (Hong, 2011; Warren, 2005). Such a view, however, ignores two fundamental dimensions of the bicultural community-organizing approach which are important leverages for improving schools as well as developing civically engaged communities—relationships and power (Hong, 2011, p. 5; Warren, 2005). Relationships are essential, and relationship-building non-negotiable, in an approach that draws from the knowledge and experience bases of members from bicultural communities. Similarly, the power to resist institutional oppression and to confront everyday racism and institutional barriers is something that is developed via relationships and something that bicultural parents need to be able to effectively promote their communities’ priorities (Olivos, 2006; Warren, 2005).

This chapter examines bicultural parents and their participation in public schools using community organizations as a medium for their interactions. Two organizations, the Salem Keizer Coalition for Equality (SKCE) of Salem, Oregon and Parent Power of Indianapolis, Indiana are used to examine the ways that bicultural parents and community members may work outside the public school context to promote local community interests as well as school objectives. These two examples were selected due to my own familiarity with them and my personal and professional interactions with individuals who are members of these organizations. They are not presented here as national “models” for other communities to emulate or as detailed ethnographic case studies. Rather, they are used for illustrative purposes, as instances of how this community-organizing approach has been operationalized in two distinct bicultural communities.

Filling in the Gaps in Parental Involvement

School officials may often think that they have it all figured out when it comes to parental involvement in schools. And why not? There is an extensive knowledge base and body of research spanning decades that demonstrates the “effectiveness” of parental involvement in schools. Yet there is still a lot missing from the “traditional” literature on parent involvement when considering bicultural parents and their involvement in schools, or there are popular claims being reinforced that may not apply directly or consistently to today’s complex, unique, and diverse society (Robinson & Harris, 2014).

When discussing parental involvement in schools, educators, researchers, and policymakers often reach the same conclusion: Connecting parents and families to local schools produces positive returns for students. It is frequently reported that school-home-community collaboration is an essential ingredient for academically, emotionally, and socially successful youth (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Certainly, few would openly question that there appears to be some form of positive return for students when parents and family members are involved in educational matters and when educators make explicit efforts to reach out to them (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Robinson & Harris, 2014). Nevertheless, public schools are complex institutions, as are the relationships between the individuals in them (teachers and parents) and the relationships between the individuals and the institutional norms (parent expectations and school expectations) (Olivos, 2006). The U.S. public school system is constructed in the image of a mythical “mainstream” society and local schools (while still part of the larger public school system) are reflective of the status of the surrounding communities (Darder, 2012; Warren, 2005; Watts, 1996). Thus, it is not uncommon to discover that many of the U.S.’s “failing” schools are in marginalized communities, serving primarily bicultural student populations. It is also in these communities that school authorities often judge parental involvement to be lacking and/or ineffective, and become convinced that “these” parents need to do “more” to improve their children’s academic achievements and future prospects.

Parent and family involvement in schools often ranks high among the factors that have a positive effect on the school performance of bicultural children (i.e., Latino, African-American, etc.) (Boethel, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Robinson & Harris, 2014). In addition to the moral encouragement and emotional support that bicultural parents provide their children at home, it is argued that bicultural parents also give active academic help and reinforcement to students (and educators) when they are visible in schools—which in turn can lead to increased academic achievement (Auerbach, 2012; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Robinson & Harris, 2014). Indeed, common sense would tell us that the presence of parents and family members in schools provides an important additional accountability measure for educators to consider when evaluating the quality of the educational opportunities being provided to students. Yet, in practice, who do schools see themselves accountable to? Ever-increasing pressures from federal and state officials, and public education foes, often force school officials to address competing agendas over priorities that may not be in the best interest of bicultural children and their communities. Anti-bilingual education ballot initiatives and charter schools come to mind when thinking about externally-driven education agendas that affect bicultural children and communities the most but about which bicultural parents and communities often have little influence over.

The research on parental involvement attempts to show a direct relationship between parent involvement in schools and student achievement. Low levels of parental involvement are linked to low academic achievement, while higher levels of parent involvement apparently influence higher student achievement

(Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, a simple causation between parent involvement and academic achievement is problematic, particularly for bicultural parents, for it assumes that schools function uniformly and that all students and parents relate similarly to school officials or have the same experiences in schools. Yet, bicultural parents may receive less than welcoming receptions at their children's schools than middle-class White parents and/or may not be given the deference that is often afforded to high-status parents from majority communities. Moreover, bicultural parents may provide support to their children in manners that are unrecognizable to, and maybe even unappreciated by, school authorities (Olivos, 2006; Robinson & Harris, 2014).

The message that involving parents in school affairs is vital for student achievement and that all parties must do their part to promote a level of interaction is not lost on policymakers, educators, or even bicultural parents. There are countless researchers (such as myself), professional educators, community organizations, and bicultural parents working to promote some form of collaboration that demonstrates positive outcomes for bicultural children and communities. During the last few decades, however, there have been increasing challenges to not only the notion that parental involvement is a uniform, value-free, identifiable set of school-like behaviors or attitudes that can be "measured," but also to the very idea that parent involvement is even effective in, and directly linked to, promoting academic achievement (de Carvalho, 2001; Lightfoot, 1979; Olivos, 2006; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Robinson & Harris, 2014).

Robinson and Harris (2014), for example, problematize the outcomes and actual effectiveness of parental involvement for bicultural parents and children and challenge the good-intentioned claims made by supporters of active parental involvement in schools. They do so by asserting that by linking "involved" parents to academic achievement and high-achieving students, the contrary, and often unspoken, claim is that parents of low-achieving students (who are often bicultural) are uninvolved and uncaring. Robinson and Harris are also concerned that by placing such importance on parental involvement as the means for improving the academic achievement of bicultural students, educators and policymakers will ignore equally (or more) influential factors that may be contributing to low educational outcomes for bicultural students—namely, social class opportunity structures and racism (in schools and in society).

In efforts to distinguish the types (or levels) of parent involvement that exists in schools, and to recognize the contributions of bicultural parents and communities, researchers and educators have developed various typologies and frameworks to account for the multiple roles parents and family members assume in and outside of schools (Epstein, 2001; Hong, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Montero-Sieburth, 2011; Olivos & Ochoa, 2006a, 2006b). These typologies have been intended to demonstrate that there may exist different motivations behind parents' interests to be involved in schools. Also different approaches may yield different outcomes for different social groups (Robinson & Harris, 2014). Meanwhile, other researchers have played with the terminology to distinguish what they believe to be more expansive forms of parental participation in schools that differ from the traditional school-initiated efforts and practices. Consequently, some researchers have argued that the term parent involvement is

too restrictive and does not completely capture the more engaged roles bicultural parents can (and should) assume to shift institutional power dynamics (Hong, 2011). As a result, some researchers have preferred to use the term “parent engagement” over the term “parent involvement.” In the words of Shirley (1997), a parental engagement perspective “designates parents as citizens in the fullest sense—change agents who can transform urban schools and neighborhoods” (p. 73).

Certainly, simply using the term parent engagement as opposed to parent involvement will not suffice for researchers and policymakers to re-conceptualize existing practices. Engaging bicultural (i.e., minority) parents in school affairs is a political act. It is a process filled with tension and at times conflict (Olivos, 2006; Shirley, 1997). It is the recognition of institutionalized power differentials between schools and bicultural communities and attends to issues that bicultural parents and families also hold of importance.

This brief review of the literature is not intended to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of parent and family involvement in student achievement but rather to draw attention to the multitude of roles and purported outcomes this participation is claimed to have. Which can be expected, there are many gaps in the research literature on parental involvement as well as many unanswered questions. One of the greatest takeaways from the existing literature (in my opinion) is that there is no one correct way to be involved, and different forms of involvement yield different outcomes, as well as different responses from school authorities (Robinson & Harris, 2014). Furthermore, home-school connections are ultimately an examination of human relations within a complex society of inequality. And, for bicultural parents, their involvement in schools is about reexamining existing social relations and about learning to navigate and (possibly) alter institutions which have been documented to perpetuate and/or legitimate inequality (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

Why Community-Organizing?

There are a growing number of scholars that have been examining grassroots organizing and community organizing as a promising model for involving bicultural parents in schools (Hong, 2011; Mediratta et al., 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Shirley, 1997; Warren & Mapp, 2011). This involvement strays a bit from the “traditional” forms of involvement often mentioned in the literature as it has as one of its goals “school reform” and not just individual student academic improvement. An additional goal is developing “civically engaged” bicultural parents who then “transfer” these skills to address concerns and issues at the community-, state-, and national-levels (Mediratta et al., 2009; Terriquez & Rogers, 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Community organizing is the most commonly used term to describe the process in which community members harness local resources and power in order “to create institutional and policy change on their own behalf” (Warren & Mapp, 2011, p. 7) (See also Hong, 2011 and Mediratta et al., 2009). There are many reasons that would prompt individuals to organize, or to join, a community group.

This can range from meeting immediate personal objectives or goals to working toward meeting longer term strategic initiatives that will benefit a larger community. Often though, community organizing, or the mobilization of people, particularly people of color (i.e., minorities), comes out of frustration—frustration with confronting a power structure that is often inaccessible to low-income and working-class bicultural individuals (Warren, 2005). In the school context, community-organizing goals are equally diverse as are the forms they take for developing social capital and power to strengthen individual parents' involvement in their children's schools and, at times, collective participation in larger issues of civic and community life (Mediratta et al., 2009; Shirley, 1997; Terriquez & Rogers, 2011; Warren, 2005; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Organizing and social movements have a long tradition in the United States, and the manners of organizing have been as diverse as the reasons for the mobilizations: i.e., labor issues, civil rights issues, or other immediate societal concern (anti-war protests, the Occupy Movement, etc.) (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Parent organizing in today's schools, however, is unique, in my opinion. It's unique in the sense that contemporary schools serve primarily bicultural, working-class, and/or immigrant communities, communities so marginalized from an imaginary "mainstream" that its members may not even have the legal authority to vote or the political power to meaningfully participate in other mainstream forms of involvement (Terriquez & Rogers, 2011). Furthermore, the participants may have no formal training or "understanding" of how community organizing works, rather they may be driven instead by trying to solve immediate concerns that affect them and their children in schools (Montero-Sieburth, 2011; Olivos, 2006).

By their nature, organized groups are also exclusionary in some sense. In other words, these groups do not represent *all* the parents thus they do not represent *all* the concerns bicultural parents may have with their children's schools or districts. Furthermore, organizational dynamics may (intentionally or unintentionally) be structured to allow for some voices to be heard more than others. Yet, similar to unions, these organizations are believed to have larger goals and to seek outcomes that will benefit a larger constituency than just the "squeaky wheels." Moreover, these organizations can create venues that allow for a more representative voice in schools and a greater leveraging of power (Hong, 2011).

Bicultural community organizing provides researchers and educators with a unique opportunity to examine how bicultural parents relate to schools when they feel disenfranchised and how bicultural parents may confront institutional barriers using various forms of capital and power. Ishimaru (2014a), for example, argues that a "community organizing approach [to parental engagement] stands in contrast to traditional ... school community partnerships" in that it "seeks to actively engage parents and community members in advocating *for themselves* as the primary means of influencing decision makers in the institutions that affect their lives" (italics in original) (p. 189). Thus, while these communities may seek outside guidance and/or assistance in helping achieve their goals, the agenda and the goals are driven by community concerns. Moreover, bicultural parents are acknowledged as the "experts" of their children's capacities and their communities' needs and resources. Sometimes, this is referred to as "grassroots" organizing, to

distinguish it from the organizing done by professional organizations that advocate “on behalf of,” or provide services to, bicultural parents (i.e., Stand for Children, etc.) (Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Warren’s (2005, Warren & Mapp, 2011) and Hong’s (2011) work on community organizing and urban education reform are additional frames of reference for helping educators and advocates make sense of the different “types” of collaborations that exist between public schools and community organizations. Warren (2005), for example, develops “a typology that identifies three different approaches [of collaboration between community based organizations and public schools]: the service approach (community schools); the development approach (community sponsorship of new charter schools); and the organizing approach (school-community organizing)” (p. 133). Of these three approaches, the organizing approach is the one that pays the most attention to issues of power and developing relationships among stakeholders, according to Warren. It is also the “more explicitly political approach to school-community collaboration” with agendas that move beyond solving individual school problems or addressing individual parent concerns (Warren, 2005, p. 164).

Re-Conceptualizing Parental Involvement

Both of the parent groups presented in this chapter could be considered “community organizations,” even though they are organizationally different from one another. The SKCE, for example, is an actual non-profit organization with over 15 years in existence with an organizational structure that involves an executive director, staff members, and a board of directors. SKCE also offers programing in schools and has been successful in securing external funding and even corporate sponsorship.

According to their website, The SKCE “formed around a crisis in both schools and prisons.” Concerns around the district’s unresponsiveness to prepare itself for the rapidly changing student demographics happening in the late 1990s and early 2000s (mostly around bilingual education and school funding), and the disproportionate effects Measure 11 (mandatory prison sentences for certain crimes) would have on communities of color, 24 volunteers from various organizations came together to confront this developing school to prison pipeline. A chair was named for the coalition and a board of directors was established. Ishimaru (2014a) documents that several board members were not new to the field of organizing and had “cut their teeth in the civil rights, farm workers, and Chicano movements” prior to their involvement with the coalition (p. 196). The director himself was not new to politics either and was at the time working “as an aide for the Oregon Commission on Hispanic Affairs” (p. 196).

In Indianapolis, a different sort of parent group emerged in 2010. Parent Power is a loosely organized group of bicultural parents from Indianapolis who have come together to discuss school concerns and to advocate for children in the local school districts. This second group, while more loosely structured, has also been active in meeting with administrators, attending rallies and legislative sessions, and hosting board candidate forums (among other things).

Parent Power is an affiliate of Parents Across America (PAA). According to its website, PAA “is a non-partisan, non-profit grassroots organization that connects parents from all backgrounds across the United States to share ideas and work together to strengthen and support our nation’s public schools.” Their purpose is to bring the “voice of public school parents to local, state and national debates,” particularly as they relate to privatization, high stakes testing, charter schools, and the “deprofessionalism [*sic*] of teaching.” While PAA is structured around a board of directors framework, Parent Power is structured more informally and there are no officers, no President, nor even a board. The voices are “decentralized” and anyone can call a meeting (Townsend, 2013).

On the surface, the SKCE is a more polished organization. In addition to having a budget, staff, board of directors, a website, and an established relationship with the district, SKCE has also had their work featured in academic journals (Ishimaru, 2014a, 2014b). Parent Power has had none of this. Parent Power has a “base” of members, which are basically an “inner-circle” of working-class, bicultural parents. They have no established leadership, no budget, and no regular meetings. Anybody can attend district meetings and say that they are members of Parent Power. The group comes and goes, but is always present when needed, or when a “crisis” emerges. Yet, Parent Power is a significant and important organization to study for their views on education and for their sources of knowledge and power.

Groups like the SKCE and Parent Power are about re-conceptualizing what parental engagement in schools is all about, and about questioning what the role of schools in society should be. They seek to expand the initiative for improving schools and school-parent collaborations by strengthening the role and power of the parents. In a 2014 email communication to its members, for example, Parent Power member John Harris Loflin wrote the following:

It is impossible to make IPS [Indianapolis Public Schools] more attractive than charter schools without opening IPS to public ownership, and thus the real participation of parents and the community in determining their own district’s destiny. Hence, the district’s work with parents must be understood as one of the most significant democratic acts all stakeholders, and teachers, in particular, can perform. Parents together with teachers must create a political community to challenge the undemocratic structures of schooling.

The email goes on to urge members to consider 15 “talking points,” they should keep in mind when talking to IPS school officials.

While these two organizations are different in many ways, they are similar in that they consider their knowledge and their strength to come from the parents and the community. The parents are the experts and their expertise is used to inform their arguments about what they feel is best for their children. Eduardo Angulo (2014), founder and former director of the SKCE, for example, once wrote that “our organization works locally. We harness the gigantic power of parents. When our people ... acquire the skills and information they need, they find their power. They become parent leaders ... speaking up when schools don’t deliver” (p. 12).

Bicultural parent-led organizations challenge deficit views about bicultural parents. They stand in contrast to what is typically expected from bicultural parents in that they (a) advocate for themselves, engaging other parents and community members in attempts to influence educational decision makers; (b) draw substantively from their own knowledge and their expertise “as experts on their children and communities” (Ishimaru, 2014a, p. 190); and (c) often promote agendas that do not seek to change themselves (culture, language, etc.) but rather to make schools more inclusive to them, their ideas, and their goals (Montero-Sieburth, 2011).

Organizing and direct actions offer strong evidence against the claim that bicultural parents are apathetic and uninterested in their children’s education. It also contradicts the notion that bicultural parents need others to advocate *for* them. For both the SKCE and Parent Power, advocacy is an important part of their work and this advocacy (and activism) is rooted in their shared desire to improve the educational conditions of their children and their communities (Ishimaru, 2014a, 2014b; Townsend, 2013). This advocacy can take on various forms. One form is direct group advocacy in which members meet directly with educational decision makers to put forth their concerns and agendas in hopes of including them in policy and practice. The SKCE in Oregon has been quite successful in their advocacy work, particularly around policies that affect English learners and bicultural family involvement in schools (Ishimaru, 2014a). They have also been successful in mobilizing bicultural parents for various causes and issues, including an “unprecedented turnout of about eight hundred Latino parents” for the 2005 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Parent Conference held in Salem, Oregon (Ishimaru, 2014a, p. 201).

John Harris Loflin, of Parent Power, uses the term “neighborhood epistemologies” to validate the notion that parent and community knowledge is what drives the work of this organization as well as the goals of their efforts. This knowledge is the source of the actions by the group, as seen in the words of one of its members: “Parent Power draws on the knowledge of parents, students and community” (Josefa Beyer, personal communication, May 20, 2016). This can also be seen in Oregon with the transformation of the SKCE from initially a “top-down advocacy” organization (in which basically the leadership “represented and advocated *for* other parents”) to a more bottom-up approach in which “the Coalition actively [validates] the parents’ own ways of knowing” to establish and improve their capacities to advocate for themselves and their children (Ishimaru, 2014a, p. 198).

When advocating, bicultural parents are rarely seeking to change themselves to be more like majority parents, rather, often they are merely looking for ways to access for their children and their community the higher outcomes the children of majority parents enjoy (Montero-Sieburth, 2011; Olivos, 2006). Thus, the issues these groups often take on are those that the public school system has frequently been accused of ignoring or shortchanging, basically issues that affect bicultural children (i.e., bilingual education, funding, access to properly trained and certified teachers, etc.). In other words, their work is often to make schools more inclusive of their ideas, their culture, and their languages, or in general, of the capital they bring to the schools. Another common goal both of these

organizations have is in creating an institutional space for their voices and participation in the schools for it is their strong belief that the schools can learn a lot from them and their community.

Tapping into Community Organizations

My book *The power of parents: A critical perspective of bicultural parent involvement in public schools* is based on my own 10+ year experience working as a bilingual education teacher with Latino students and parents in a working-class, urban neighborhood in San Diego, CA (Olivos, 2006). The purpose of my book was to examine and critique existing practices and relationships between bicultural (low-income, Latino) parents and school officials (teachers and administrators). At the time, I was most concerned with trying to understand why there existed such a tense relationship between two entities (schools and bicultural parents) which appeared to have the same goal (of caring for and educating children) as their missions. The tense relationship I documented was overt at times but for the most part it was a passive process in that the Latino parents were just simply not invited to participate in anything beyond the well-established recognizable forms of involvement that reflected school and teacher priorities and expectations. Hong (2011) critiques the messages this failure to reach out sends to bicultural parents:

Schools take on the sole responsibility for educating children and make active decisions to leave the parents out of the process. While this might be seen as a more passive and harmless exchange, the absence of a relationship or an interaction between families and schools is usually detrimental. (p. 17)

I was most drawn by the resistance administrators felt toward having bicultural parents participate in higher levels of decision-making in the school and in the district. In particular, I was intrigued by the fact that the Latino parents often had difficulty resolving independent issues that concerned their children's education. There appeared to be a double-standard for bicultural parents at my school and district. There were outward critiques about their low-level presence at school events but at the same time there was resistance to their involvement if it crossed into the domain of what was considered educational expertise. Shannon (1996) called this double-standard, the paradox of minority parental involvement:

Parent involvement for minority language parents can be paradoxical. Traditionally, they are not involved and teachers complain. However, teachers also complain about the aggressive parent involvement of majority, middle-class Anglo parents. If minority language parents choose to become involved, they may be perceived ... to be aggressive. Unfortunately, the majority parents' aggressiveness is tolerated, whereas the minority parent's [*sic*] action may be not only ignored and dismissed but also attacked as irrational. (p. 83)

The paradox Shannon identifies is enlightening in that it succinctly problematizes the expectations educators have of parents in general and bicultural parents in particular. The involvement of “high status” parents is tolerated because these parents have the tools and the resources to negotiate success for their children.

The Latino parents I worked with in San Diego eventually created their own “external” parent organization, called the *Latino Parent Congress* (*Congreso de Padres Latinos*) (a pseudonym is used in the book). I did not use the term at the time, mostly due to the fact that there was not a lot of academic literature on the topic (or I just wasn’t familiar with it), but what the Latino parents were doing in San Diego was “community organizing.” Much like the SKCE and Parent Power, they were using their relationships with each other to strengthen their voices and to develop collective power to address their local school and district on issues that most concerned them and their community (Olivos, 2006). The parent group in my study, however, unfortunately didn’t last long, maybe two years or so. Unlike SKCE and Parent Power, the parents I worked with in San Diego were unable to maintain their existence beyond the individuals that comprised the group. Once the parents’ children (and some key teachers) left the school, the organization lost momentum and disintegrated.

Grassroots community organizing with bicultural parents is a fascinating phenomenon in that it challenges many myths about what bicultural parents are capable of doing, or willing to do, for their children and their community. Clearly, at the root of many of these parent-led groups are individual concerns about their own children, concerns that are often left unaddressed by school authorities. Equally important, however, is the manner in which these parent groups help schools reconsider their conceptualizations of parental involvement in schools. These parent groups challenge deficit views about bicultural parents’ capabilities and contributions, create knowledge by providing access to information, and embrace the political nature of bottom-up school reform.

Engaging bicultural (i.e., minority) parents in school affairs is a political act. It is a process filled with tension and at times conflict (Hong, 2011; Ishimaru, 2014a, 2014b; Olivos, 2006; Townsend, 2013). Parent-led organizations, or groups, that are not affiliated with the public schools present a unique level of collaboration for schools. Unbound by bureaucratic restraints that exist in the school system, bicultural parent-led organizations may take on initiatives that schools have not prioritized and approach school personnel in manners that they are not accustomed to (Johnson, 2012; Olivos, 2006). From providing information to a community that is often left uninformed or misinformed about important educational issues, to using that information to promote and advocate their agendas to lawmakers, bicultural parent-led organizations are participating in political projects.

Participating in projects that advance educational reform measures entails believing there is something wrong with the current state of affairs. Grassroots parent-led groups that advocate for their children’s and their community’s interests are participating in the political acts of organizing and civic participation (Hong, 2011; Ishimaru, 2014a; Terriquez & Rogers, 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011). The parent groups mentioned in this chapter (and the ones I’m personally familiar with) believe they are participating in political advocacy and accept

its terms. In other words, unlike traditional forms of parental involvement where “politics” are ignored and efforts are aimed at “getting along,” the SKCE and Parent Power accept conflict and political compromise as part of the struggle of education reform.

Ishimaru’s work (2014a) describes the political journey of the SKCE in Oregon and their shifts in political strategies from being assertive and “demanding,” to collaborating and at times even dependent on the district to financially subsidize their parent training efforts. In her work, however, the SKCE parent leaders are not apologetic about the conflict nor their initial approaches to create tension. In fact, members of the SKCE board felt that this “in your face” approach was necessary given the urgency of the problems and the political time period: “board members felt that such an ... initial approach was the only way to get people’s attention and force change, particularly in a town with as much demographic denial as Salem” (p. 200).

In Indianapolis, Parent Power also works on many political fronts under the belief that educational reform and changing the nature of bicultural parental involvement in schools is a political project. From meeting with “people in high places” and influencing elections (organizing in 2010 “the first parent-led forum for IPS school board candidates”) (Townsend, 2013), members of Parent Power have also participated in study groups around conflict theory and critical pedagogy, taking into consideration the “ultimate purpose of education” and that “questioning authority is not a solo mission” (Townsend, 2013).

Relationships, Social Capital, and Power

In late 2016, I worked with a colleague from another Pacific Northwest university to facilitate three “design circles” with a group of Latino parents called together by the SKCE. This work was part of a larger national research collaborative designed to explore and re-conceptualize the ways bicultural families and neighbors promote and achieve educational equity in their local communities. These particular design circles were intended to help the parents articulate educational issues that most concerned them and to strengthen their efforts to secure greater educational outcomes for their children and access to the power brokers in their local school district (principals and administrators) for their community. From a community-organizing perspective, relationships and relationship-building between bicultural parents are important ingredients for building social capital as well as power.

The work of Annette Lareau (1989, Lareau & Horvat, 1999) is often referenced when theorizing about why school authorities offer greater deference to high- and middle-class, White parents than bicultural parents. Her work is extremely useful in that it examines the complex manner in which material and cultural conditions provide “individuals with resources which they can effectively marshal in the social sorting process” (1989, p. 4). This argument is based on the assumption that societal institutions play an important role in the larger process of social reproduction and that individuals and groups use the resources at their disposal to secure advantage in the social class hierarchy (Darder, 2012). Individuals “activate” this capital (resources) when needed to negotiate advantage in a

particular social field or setting (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). This capital comes in the form of social relations (social capital), cultural understanding and navigation of a particular system one is familiar with or has a cultural “match” with (cultural capital), and economic resources and/or tools (economic capital). Yet, as Lareau & Horvat (1999) rightfully acknowledge, “all social or cultural capital does not have the same value in a given field” (p. 39). In other words, parents must not only activate their capital to secure advantage but this capital must be recognized as legitimate in the particular social setting.

According to Warren (2005), relationships and social capital are intimately related to issues of power for bicultural communities. Social capital are those “sets of resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between and among people” (p. 136). These resources are often outside the realm of money and financial resources, since those are often in short supply in bicultural, working-class communities. Instead, the resources and power bicultural parents draw from are the links that they have amongst themselves and their communities. These links are strengthened when they include institutions, “like schools and community-development organizations,” etc. (Warren, 2005, p. 137).

In working with the SKCE and Parent Power, relationships and relationship-building were apparent in my visits. Design circles in Salem began with “ice-breaking” activities among parents and discussions about the cultural and social resources the parents brought to the table. I recall one activity where participants tossed around a ball of yarn and shared out what their dream careers were in Mexico and then discussed the barriers they encountered that precluded them from fulfilling their dreams. Each participant held onto the yarn as the ball was tossed around. At the end, the participants had a visual representation (from the yarn they were each holding) of how they were each connected in their struggle for educational justice for their children and their community. This activity was completely parent-led and facilitated.

In fall of 2015, I was an invited keynote speaker at an event organized by Parent Power, Indiana University-Purdue Indianapolis (IUPUI), and the Black & Latino Policy Institute. Prior to my visit, I had had contact with the organization on various parent engagement-related issues. During my visit, I was able to witness some of how Parent Power worked with bicultural parents and how they worked on relations between the parents and members of the community. Parent Power had their weekly meetings over food at a local soul food restaurant, and this is where we met during my visit. Parent Power had an open invitation to parents who wished to join in on their meetings. At the table during my particular visit, there were local clergy, community members, elected officials, school officials (one board member was in attendance), and, of course, bicultural parents. As “critical friends” of the IPS, the parents shared out their goals, their projects, and their frustrations with IPS. Their voices were central in the discussion as we all listened to the parents’ plans to help improve (and hold accountable) IPS and how they intended to combat what they felt was the intrusion of for-profit charter schools into their communities.

According to John Harris Loflin, parents, teachers, and school staff are “social equals,” and as equals, all voices must be acknowledged (personal communication, May 23, 2016). Organizations such as Parent Power and the SKCE contain

the identifiable features of developing relationships as a means of developing social capital and power. This is important for educators to recognize in these bicultural parent organizations since “social capital is fundamentally about relationships ... [of] trust and cooperation among teachers, principals, parents, and community residents” (Warren, 2005, p. 137). Yet, relationships on their own are not enough to make change happen. Bicultural parents must possess, or employ, some form of power if school reform is to take place in their communities. Indeed, as Warren (2005) reminds us, “a low-income parent of color typically lacks the status and education to collaborate as an equal with her child’s teacher” (p. 138). It is in these instances that community organizing can be of assistance for these parents. Both Parent Power and the SKCE, for example, can help the parents develop “relational power” with their local schools and districts, as opposed to only unilateral power (Warren, 2005).

Unilateral power can best be understood as power used to “force” concessions or changes from institutions. It is an “outside” strategy to education reform but is often “insufficient for improving urban schools” (Warren, 2005). What is also needed is relational power, which comes more in the form of collaboration. This is an approach in which groups are “willing to confront powerful institutions, but only when recalcitrant elites refuse to negotiate” (Warren, 2005, p. 138). During my visit to Indianapolis, I witnessed collaborative exchanges between principals, teachers, and board members and representatives of Parent Power (during school visits and the public forum) but also tense interactions that I could only describe as discomfort from a board member who was visiting the same school we were when she was asked direct questions about the future of IPS schools in the era of charter schools and privatization.

Discussion

The two bicultural parent-led groups used as examples in this chapter are not unique. There are many organizations that bring working-class, bicultural parents, and community members together to advocate for educational justice and, at times, larger conceptualizations of community empowerment. It is estimated that “there [were] some 500 organizing groups focused on educational reform” in the nation in the early 2000s (as cited in Hong, 2011, p. 5). In South Los Angeles, for example, there is another parent group I am familiar with: *Parent U-Turn* a multicultural parent organization that promotes collaboration with schools and parent advocacy via a multitude of ways that draw from the members’ knowledge base and their particular concerns with schools. They work to inform and educate “parent and community members on ways to improve student academic achievement,” including authentic assessment and college access (Johnson, 2012, p. 51). They also “work to increase parent involvement in decision-making, especially those [parents] who have been traditionally disconnected from schools” (Johnson, 2012, p. 54). Beyond immediate school academic achievement concerns, Parent U-Turn members also work on broader leadership “opportunities to analyze and reflect on how the issues of school restructuring, social justice, and multiculturalism ... affect their school communities,” while establishing a

“corps of parent and community leaders who can participate in educational reform efforts through access to skill-building resources” which include action plans with local school districts (Johnson, 2012, p. 53).

There are gaps in the parent involvement research that educators in schools need to fill in in their practice in order to better understand the resources and contributions of the bicultural parent and the bicultural community in the education of their children and the functioning of their schools. Warren (2005) argues that “community-based organizations can help bring the cultural and social assets of a community into schools and foster meaningful partnerships between schools and families” (p. 135). Community organizations are fascinating re-conceptualizations of traditional ideas of what parent involvement in schools is. Educators and researchers can learn a lot about concerns that preoccupy bicultural parents and the capacities they have as they organize their efforts to confront schools.

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