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It's Not What You Know, It's…:
The Untold Stories of Parent Advocates

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Abstract: After reviewing the literature on parental involvement, it is evident that there is a lack of scholarly information that speaks directly toward parents advocating for all children. This paper explores the common characteristics and motivations of mothers who are advocating for changes within the public school system.

Background

Mark Twain once said, "The greatness of a nation lies in the strength of its public schools" (ISBE, 2003). If this statement is true, then we, the citizens of the U.S. should be alarmed. Countless people across this nation have lost confidence in the system's ability to educate our children and many corporations are insisting they can do a better job educating our children, which is partly contributing to the recent surge of charter schools. When public education was established, it was envisioned to be an equalizer of opportunity and was to serve as a beacon of hope and mobility for the poor and powerless (Noguera, 2003).

In the United States, the quality of the public education system has been deteriorating over the past few decades. Public schools across this nation have been and continue to suffer from issues such as overcrowding and inadequate staffing. Under funding, one of the biggest and

most detrimental issues has plagued public schools for decades, even during times in which our society experienced an economic growth.

In urban communities, especially where gentrification is rampant, public schools are facing a record amount of school closures, high drop-out and push-out rates, deplorable building conditions, lack of essential supplies (e.g. textbooks) and a shortage of qualified experienced teachers coupled with a high turn over of those teachers who are properly credentialed. In fear of not meeting the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and consequently losing federal funding, many public schools in these communities have eliminated recess all together in order to maximize class instruction.

Noguera (2003) believes that "the dearth of good schools is … the inevitable byproduct of a system that is almost completely unaccountable to those it serves" (p. 15). Many parents today seem unaware that as adults, parents and citizens, they have the responsibility to demand change and hold the schools accountable in delivering a quality education, not to just their child but to all the children in their school. Kelly Alin Butler, of Parents for Public Schools remind us "The quality of public school affects each of us—whether or not we have children in these schools… All of us who value community should be active in public school improvement" (Clark, 1995, current section).

Problem

Parents have been left out as a valuable resource in education reform. "There is little or no opportunity for parents and others outside the system to participate with equality in discussions about the process of an education which might result in action to change the system" (Moss, 2001, p.105). Although many schools talk about parents being partners, they maintain a climate that is not welcoming to parents (Fine, 1993). "Instead of opening up and encouraging genuine parental participation, the school structure eliminates anything that might erode the power equilibrium" (Fege, 2000, p. 39).

A number of writers have characterized the relationship between schools and parents as problematic, often citing the organizational structure: The current structure of public schooling does not invite public engagement, but instead reinforces a hierarchical and bureaucratic pattern that gives neither students nor parents an official voice. Instead of opening up and encouraging genuine parental participation, the school structure eliminates anything that might erode the power equilibrium (Fege, 2000, p. 39).

Often when parents gather, formally and informally, they find themselves sharing their dissatisfaction about their children's school. Due to a complexity of reasons including feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, many of these parents are hesitant to take action and advocate. Getting parents to recognize that their lack of involvement and advocacy is a problem is difficult, "because we all have been socialized most effectively to accept the power relationships characteristic of our schools as right, natural, and proper outcomes (Sarason, 1991 as cited in Fine, 1993, p.706).

Purpose

In spite of the many barriers that serve as a deterrence to involvement and advocacy, "some parents are making the decision to stay [willingly or unwillingly] and to fight---to work harder to make their public schools better…"(Bloom, 1992, p.239). The purpose of this study was to interview these types of parents-parent advocates- and explore the common characteristics

and motivations of mothers who are advocating for children who have not been labeled as having special needs in the public school.

According to Urrieta, Jr. (2004), focus on advocacy should not only imagine large collective wholes, but perhaps most importantly specific context as sites of change and transformation with a broader understanding and interpretations of advocacy as a daily, moment to moment conscious practice (p.6). The parents in this study are involved in local advocacy; they are advocating to improve the conditions at their child's public school in hopes to make improvement that will affect all the children. These parents are advocating for a better school that will provide their children with a quality education in a safe environment that is conducive for learning.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

The theoretical framework for my study was Critical Theory, a theory that is "grounded in an activist desire to fight oppression [and] injustice" (Brookfield, 2005, p.10). This study explored the motivation of parents who not only challenge the assumptions and structures of an urban public school system that oppresses them and their children, but also take action and seek change. Ultimately this paper gives voice to the participants, whose perspectives have historically been marginalized and ignored in the literature.

In an effort to cherish and preserve the voices and stories of the parents in my study, narrative inquiry was used as the methodology. Narrative inquiry is a holistic way to view an individual because it acknowledges the cognitive, affective and motivational dimension of meaning making. Narrative inquiry takes into account not just the story but how the story is told. It was through the retelling of my participants' stories, the sharing of their emotions and inquiry of outside influences and conditions, that I gained insight into their world and their thoughts. Besides the usefulness of narrative inquiry, I chose this methodology because its' reciprocal inquiry would allow me to reflect and confront my own untold narratives.

Consistent with qualitative research, semi-structured interviews, approximately 90 minutes in length, were the primary mode of data collection. These interviews were conducted over a seven-week period during the months of February and March 2006. Interviews allowed me to hear how the participants interpret their world and what they believe to be the source of their motivation.

The participants of my study consisted of: eight Black women, one bi-racial (African-American and Caucasian) and one naturalized U.S. citizen born in Bolivia, and ranged in age from their mid 30's to late 40's. Because past research shows that mothers are more likely than fathers to be involved in their children's education, women were exclusively sought for this study and were identified through snowballing. These mothers are advocating for changes within their child's school with the hopes that not just their child, but all the children of the school will benefit.

Significance/ Contributions to Education

Currently our public schools are in a state of emergency; our children are in a state of emergency. At present, an overwhelming amount of literature focuses solely on traditional forms of parent involvement and also barriers that prevent parents from being involved. At times, the term parent involvement has included activities such as committee work, planning committees and other decision-making bodies but when used in this manner it often still means "involvement on institutional terms, [where] parents find themselves rubber-stamping the school district's

agenda" (Bloom 1992, p. 2000, also stated by Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001, abstract section).

My paper takes the position that the voices of the parents not only are legitimate and offer the educational community a lot to learn, but that also there is a need for their voices to be represented in the literature. According to Michael Apple, a professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies, a good deal of critical work in education seeks to answer the questions: "Whose knowledge and ways of knowing are considered legitimate?" and "Who voices are heard?" (Cervero, Wilson and associates, 2001, p. x).

This research adds to the field by giving educators a way to give insight to the staff of public schools in an effort to help them unlearn their hegemonic beliefs about the working class and to build ideological commitments to advocacy (Bloom, 2001). Hopefully with the results of my study, educators will be able to assist parents in becoming "confident, well-informed and influential people in the education of their children and in the educational life of the community" (Fine, 1993, p. 685).

Findings

The data strongly suggests that these parent advocates are: (1) engaged in traditional forms of parental involvement, (2) partly motivated by their distrust of the school system and (3) continually inspired and motivated by their belief that change is possible.

Traditional Forms of Parent Involvement

Most of the participants began volunteering at their child's school when their child entered kindergarten. All the parents mentioned that as time passed and their children got older, their amount of parent involvement increased, contrary to past research which states "by the 4th grade, parental involvement tends to decline" (Children's Aid Society, 2003, p.2). The parents of multiple children mentioned that they became more involved as each subsequent child entered school. Some parents stated that their involvement increased because their child had become more involved in school. Parents also noted that as their children became older and started participating in extra-curricular activities: band, track, football…, their amount of involvement also increased as they supported their children and the school in these new activities.

Realizing the importance and need for their involvement as their children got older, not only did their involvement increase, but the type of participation these parents were involved in changed. The parents in my study have gone from classroom volunteers to school wide volunteers. Initially, when their children began attending school, these advocates were involved in traditional forms of parent involvement: classroom volunteers and chaperones of field trip.

Currently all the parents have a high level of engagement at their child's school. All the parents in my study are members of various school organizations: PTA (Parent Teacher Association, PTO (Parent Teacher Organization), PAC (Parent Advisory Committee), booster parents, bilingual committee and some are even members of the Alumni Association at their school, because they too attended the school. Many of them have taken leadership roles as elected representatives on decision-making/ governance committees. Besides being involved in these school organizations, the parents in my study are also involved in parent organizations outside their schools. These organizations bring parents together from various public schools.

These parents' activities and involvement progressed in stages similar to those in a model developed by Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock and Lecklinder). This hierarchical model

categorizes the types of partnerships that a parents can have with the school into four levels (p.36):

        Level One: Communication e.g. Parent-teacher conferences
        Level Two: Family Development e.g. Workshops
        Level Three: Community Activities e.g. PTA
        Level Four: Advocacy

Distrust

        In the beginning, these parents had a great working relationship with the teachers, principal and staff of the school. As these parents took on new roles as members and officers in these organizations, they discussed how their relationship with the school and its staff began to change. These parents no longer felt welcomed in the school. Parents found that when they sought information that they needed to perform their leadership roles in these school organizations, administrators were uncooperative and were intentionally withholding information.

        It was these and other actions taken by administration that led these parents to *distrust* the administrators at the school. Like the literature stated, they were only welcome and allowed to be involved in the school when it was clear they were participating in ways the schools liked, supporting the school in ways they wanted to be supported (Bloom 1992; Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001, abstract section citations). It was this sense of distrust about the administration's motives that led many of the participants to advocate.

        As the schools resisted the parents' efforts to work with them towards school improvement, parents became even more motivated to continue to fight for change. Parents began realizing that these schools did not desire change, and therefore resisted those who came in and tried to 'stir things up'. At this point, parents began to seek information outside the school but still within the school system. On this level, the district level, parents soon realized that these school officials also may not really have their children's interest at heart but rather, their interest appeared to be self-serving. One participant asked,

        Is the system really wanting for us to succeed, or just constantly fail? And [then] they sit here and get fat off of the funds. Is that it? Cause all these highly educated people that we have over us, these um, area instructional officers, now they supposed to be dynamic. They should know what this school needs since they have to okay it.

Another participant also questioned what was happening behind the scenes,

        There are things being put in place; basically, they are being set up to fail. [At my son's school] we are being set up to fail; so that somebody can come in [and say]: "Ohh – [you've been on] probation three years". We're gonna clean house.
        And that is what is being done slowly, little bit by little bit, because some of us are a little bit more (pause) privy and we know what's going on. See you can fool some of the people some of the time, and that's what's going on. So some of us do know what's going on.

One more participant, Shirley, added, "It seems to be more about the business of education instead of the real mission of education". Shirley warns us to be cautious and aware because she believes, "They [legislators] don't care. It's not a priority [for them]; it's not their kids." Shirley also told me about a situation where she felt that the principal was intentionally keeping information from her. Shirley is president of her school governance committee, a committee that is responsible for monitoring the school's budget. Up until this moment, Shirley believed that she and the principal had a great working relationship. About this incident Shirley said, "When I saw

that the principal would kind of shying away from me learning how to read the budget I said oh okay; it's something to this."

Change is Possible

The parents in my study have been advocating for years. Sometimes their efforts have been successful, while other times they have not. Even though many of the children of these advocates will no longer be in the school system to reap the benefits of their advocacy, the parents in my study continue to fight.

These parents whole-heartedly believe that change is possible within their children's school. Similarly, Chandler and Jones (2003) who interviewed women who were working for social change, found the belief 'that a better world is possible' motivated and inspired these political activists (p. 75). The participants in my study understand change is a slow process and it is because of their belief that change is possible that many parents stated that it is their intent to continue their advocacy even after their child has left the school.

If there is any hope for a transformation of our public school system, we must make noise and hold our schools and government accountable. In the words of President George H. Bush, "There will be no renaissance without revolution" (as cited in Kozol, 2005, p. 201).

Conclusion

The following is a pledge, originally written by President Woodrow Wilson, that over two million parents signed in November 1995 that states what our commitments should be as adults. Hopefully as educators we can get more people to believe and live this pledge.
I am the owner of the public school system; that as an owner, I bear a responsibility to participate in the system; that accountability for my public schools and its employees and its funding rests with me and the rest of the system's owners; that my child's future depends on improvement of public education; and that this improvement depends on my participation (Clark, 1995, Current Situation sect.)

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