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Parents as Citizens of School

Communities:

Latina mothers navigating the tensions surrounding cultural differences, language barriers, and expectations in Hartford Public Schools.

Katherine Apfelbaum

May, 2011

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement and participation has a positive effect on schools; however, the role parents may fill is often narrowly scripted by the school, dictated by the norms of the dominant class. As the United States becomes more of a pluralist society, the interaction and participation of different cultures and socio-economic groups will become increasingly more important. Literature and research provide support for the necessity and positive impact of community involvement in schools (Dyrness 2004; 2008; Dyrness and Hurtig 2010). It also considers issues of race, class, and gender when discussing the roles in which parents play (Lareau 1987; Moll 1992). However, I would like to expand the body of research of participatory action research and parent involvement by looking at how Hartford parents are creating their own social capital, becoming culturally bilingual, in order to make an impact on schools. Legislation across the country is creating options for parents to take charge of school reforms through parent empowerment and choice acts, leading questions on who has the right to a voice and a vote in education. This narrow focus on Hartford will look at how parents in a transnational city take action.

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Literature Review

Inequalities in the curricula, policies, power structures, day-to-day practices, and pedagogies of the American public education system are most apparent to the marginalized members of the learning community. This is a review of the literature on

participatory action research, with a focus on Latin@¹ parental community involvement in the American public school system. It forms the basis for research the challenges faced by the Latina parent community in participating in Hartford Public Schools (HPS), creating a lens for how these tensions affects conceptualizations of “citizenship” in Hartford, Connecticut.

In the context of public education, the roles of parents and teachers are often defined and conceptualized in terms of the perspectives and expectations of each; however, the way in which each perceives themselves and their counterparts is not always compatible, particularly in the case of white teachers and Latin@ parents (Hurtig 2008a, p 207-209). The expectations of parent involvement have become “increasingly formalized, homogenized, and regulated over the past few decades as parent involvement becomes institutionalized as educational policy (Dyrness & Hurtig, 2010: 1; de Carvalho, 2001:24). Schools often encourage parent participation but narrowly define the role of parent as a submissive, supporting one (Lareau, 1987).

This relationship derives from a deficit-based framework, which points to inadequate cultural capital in the home as the cause of low academic achievement of minority students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and, significantly, the mismatch between the cultural capital in the home and that valued by the school. Deficit theories define minority and low income cultures (and cultural capital) as inferior to that of the white middle class. (Henry, 1996; Lagemann, 1993; Valdes, 1996; Bourdieu, 1994; Lareau, 1987). Moll describes it as follows:

The concept of ‘cultural deprivation’ presumes universal criteria for

¹ The term Latin@ will be used as an inclusive work, representing Latino and Latina parents

referencing culture, language, or dialect against which all other language use and cultural practices are judged to be deficient or inappropriate (Diaz, Moll, Mehan, 1992: 191).

In these circumstances, the burden and blame falls on the student: what can be done to deposit all of the knowledge the child lacks? Rather than placing the teacher (the professional educator) in the position to draw on the strengths of the child and use those strengths to increase the scope of his or her education. Success in the deficit lens hinges on the ability of the teacher to remove the student from his or her cultural background, and teaching him or her in the dominant culture's methods and styles.

By the late 1990's, research shifted towards analyzing the capacity of parents as educators and critics, rather than enablers. This new focus concentrated on the experience and impact of parents as players in the education system, rather than the outputs of parent involvement in the form of test results. From this new ethnographic work emerged two distinct forms of ethnographic research on parent involvement: "critical" ethnography where the ethnographer creates an account of the social inequalities that affect and are affected by the construction of parent involvement from an outside perspective (Dyrness & Hurtig, 2010; McDermott, 1997: 114) and "activist" ethnography where the ethnographer gains access to parent critiques by actually engaging in the activity (Dyrness & Hurtig, 2010). Critical ethnographies found a mismatch of value systems between schools and homes, creating tension and misunderstandings between parents and teachers (Dyrness & Hurtig, 2010; Valdes, 1996).

"Pedagogies of the home" are the focal points of this ethnography, emphasizing the values, language skills, cultural practices, and family commitment to learning of these

communities (Dyrness & Hurtig, 2010; Lopez, 2001; Gonzalez, 2001; Zentella, 1997;2005; Villenas and Deyhle, 1999; Reese, 2002).

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research provides an opportunity for parents to create a space for dialogue and define roles beyond those which the school creates.

Latin@ parents express frustration and sadness at the hands of the teachers and administrators of the schools. Delgado Bernal calls this response the “Mestiza consciousness,” where one “balances, negotiates, and draws from her bilingualism, biculturalism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities” (Delgado Bernal, 2006:118). Bernal presents the mestiza consciousness as “balancing between and within the different communities to which one belongs,” and a negotiation of “borderlands [which] refers to the geographical, emotional, and psychological space occupied by mestizas, and it serves as a metaphor for the condition of living, between spaces, cultures, and languages” (Bernal, 2006:123). They fight feelings of alienation, marginalization, and shame after having the school reject or denigrate their language and culture by creating support groups for action. And these groups are then one way in which they participate in this negotiation and balance their lives in the borderland.

Latin@ parents and teachers do not always hold the same expectations for their, and each other’s, roles in the education of the students (Hurtig 2008a, p 207-209; Dyrness & Hurtig, 2010); therefore, there must be sensitivity to what expectations can appropriately and realistically be shifted to home life. Moll et. al. found that Latin@ family frameworks are much more flexible than the “traditional” American nuclear

family; “the social, economic, and linguistic demands of life in the community are met with familial flexibility. Adjusting roles and responsibilities are necessary for survival” (Moll et. al., 1992: 210). In some cases, where the parent(s) are monolingual, the children bear the responsibility to conduct transactions with “important social institutions (e.g. paying bills or answering school-related queries)” (Moll et. al., 1992: 210). Adaptation to new environments is required for survival; however, when “school-related queries” concern student absences, conduct, or achievement issues, it becomes problematic and inappropriate for the student to serve as the intermediary between teacher and parent. When this occurs, the parent is not seen as a partner in the child’s education, but rather an observer. The dynamics among the child, teacher, and parent are less strong, because all parties are unable to contribute equally and as powerfully.

In the “funds of knowledge” approach, presented by Moll et. al., teachers serve as the ethnographers, accessing the social and cultural skills a community adopts for survival and incorporating them in the curriculum (Moll et. al., 1992; Greenberg, 1989; Tapia, 1991; Véléz-Ibéñez, 1988). In this method, educators serve as partners in the flexible, multifaceted support-structure of the family. They are provided with intensive training on techniques and learning frameworks to target specific areas of concern by connecting community assets with education theory. Since this model can place unrealistic expectations on parents and teachers; teachers can adopt a stance of responsive openness to find feasible avenues of dialogue and involvement for all community members. Each family creates its own unique balance of responsibilities in a transnational community, so it would be very challenging for one teacher to be able to correctly draw from each support network. By creating a space for the Latin@

community to provide the cultural “funds of knowledge”, classrooms can become community environments that enable students to display skills and knowledge in myriad ways.

The narrow roles in which schools place parents exclude the cultural and linguistic strengths of the community. Leadership from school administrations would facilitate this movement by providing translators for parents, Spanish programs for teachers, and English programs for parents. From there, they can accommodate linguistic limitations of the parents and the teachers, creating an open space for dialogue and a clearer path to educational progress.

Wyman and Kashtok call this interaction “Triangulating” (Wyman and Kashtok, 2008). This term encapsulates the idea that teachers must stretch beyond the triangle of their comfort zone (work, house, store) and venture out into the community. Otherwise, the teacher isolates him or herself and constructs limits to the ways in which he or she connects with parents and students. Triangulating requires a sensitivity to the culture of the community, as well as an open responsiveness to new forms of cultural capital, without which the community may not be as receptive as it could be, diminishing the potential gains that all could enjoy from the relationship.

While the education system incorrectly discounts the assets of minority parents, particularly Latin@ parents, parents may need to adopt practices that schools recognize as capital in order to gain access to the information and frameworks through which they can make changes from within the school. Bourdieu refers to these traits as those that “define the state of the relations of power, institutionalized in durable social statuses that are socially recognized or legally guaranteed,... that determine the actual or potential

powers in different fields and the chances of access to the specific profits they procure” (Bourdieu, 1994:113). By acquiring characteristics that the school recognizes as “valuable”, the cultural practices and values, skills, and language associated with the dominant class and race, parents can gain access to a different culture.

METHOD

In order to investigate the social and cultural effects language barriers have on the ways in which parents interact with and in school communities, phenomenological interviews were conducted with Latina mothers following two months of participant-observation in their adult ESL class. Phenomenology is the study of experiences, with analytical attention to the perspective of the individual with the firsthand knowledge; an experience is taken as a construction of social forces and individual perspective (Watson 1988). When investigating the obstacles Latina mothers face in interactions with HPS, this approach gave insight into not only the perceived external obstacles, but also the internal perspectives and factors that deterred full participation. Phenomenological interviews place the focus on the experience of the Latina mothers, allowing their perspectives voices to guide the conversation and research. These interviews combined with a review of the literature, data from the Census, and Hartford Public School profiles will create a comprehensive picture.

PROCEDURE

Interview Setting

The interviews were conducted following two months of participant-observation at the community adult learning center for ESL in the school building. A translator was

required for the interviews, which added another dynamic to the interviews. As a researcher, my background as a white, English speaking college student formed a barrier between myself and the interview participants. Not only were their words translated, but they were at times hesitant to truly express their opinions, particularly criticisms of the school. Carlos², a native-Spanish speaker of Puerto Rican ancestry assisted as an interpreter in the interviews. Ramon is also a board member of the non-profit adult learning center, and although many of the students were familiar with him, participants of other Hispanic backgrounds were hesitant to say anything against Puerto Rican parents or culture. While the participants were open about many issues, these social and language differences created subtle tensions that obstructed a truly open conversation in the interviews.

Interview Participants

All of the students in the spring semester ESL class with children in public schools were women. All seven agreed to talk with me about their experiences as Latina mothers with children in HPS. Although not a scientifically significant sample of the Latina parent population in Hartford, the women represented most of the theoretical groups: native citizens, naturalized citizens, migrants from Puerto Rico, and immigrants. Three women identified as Puerto Rican, two migrating to Hartford and one born in Hartford, two women emigrated from Peru, one woman emigrated from Colombia, and one emigrated from the Dominican Republic. Some gave birth to children in Hartford, while others immigrated with young children. Their education backgrounds differed greatly, as did their experiences with various forms of school as students themselves and

² All names have been changed to protect anonymity

as children. Only two of the women received formal education beyond high school, but neither had completed a degree. While this may be a characteristic of this particular group of parents in the class in the first place, all of the women expressed a continuous desire to learn and saw learning as ammunition for when opportunities arose.

Unanimously, they saw experience and knowledge from informal education experiences (informal as a term encompassing non-credited classes and personal learning experiences for purposes of this report) as a cornerstone of life education; schools and formally organized education systems were not the nexus of education for them.

DATA ANALYSIS

This research project as an investigation into how Latin@ parents in Hartford were creating social capital through educational opportunities, with the intention to critique the school system. Based on ethnographic observation in a local adult ESL classroom, parents were learning English with the intent to employ it as a tool to gain influence and traction in the school system. As the observation and interview process progressed, a closer look at participant perspectives and challenges led to an adaptation of the research lens towards answering the following question: what obstacles are deterring Latina mother engagement in Hartford Public Schools?

As the project progressed, like the research question, the findings grew and changed. While this sample is too small to produce overarching trends of the city, a few themes emerged out of the interviews and observations. The mothers gave voice to parent population that faces the following obstacles to school inclusion and advocacy for the educational rights of their children: fear, transience, a lack of knowledge about the

school system, intra-ethnic tensions among Latina mothers, and treatment by the schools themselves.

Transience

In the city of Hartford, 23% of the population has changed residences in the last year (American Communities Survey 2009). With a quarter of the adult population in transit from school to school each year, this also means that school populations are constantly in flux. In the 2006-2007 school year, 26% of Hartford students attended a different school the previous year (SSP Hartford, 06-07).³

One mother, Marcella, was looking to move over the summer, said, “I didn’t bother working to understand the school, I’m moving next year so my baby will go to another school. I spend more time looking for the new school.”⁴ Marcella, moved to Hartford from Colombia midway through the year, and rather than spending time learning about her son’s current school, she focused on gathering information about schools for next year. She also cited that as a newly arrived immigrant, virtually no other parent from the school had approached her to either welcome her to the community or to give her information on the school. This isolation has negatively affected her experience at the school, leading her to look elsewhere for the next school year.⁵ It also shows the emotional strain and fatigue that grows in a community that is constantly changing. The school and parent community seem to be tire from the yearly strain on the emotional and fiscal resources they must spend to constantly update information (on both the parent and

³ This is the most recently released information

⁴ Interview with Marcella

⁵ Interview with Estella 4/21/11

school sides) in order to keep all parties informed and in a position to participate in and contribute to the community.

Bonding among parents and between schools and parents is an important part of building a school community; when the current population is making plans for the future at a different school and the future population is getting used to different policies and culture of a different, current school, it is a large challenge to create a strong, working relationship in nine short months. With this transience, it is possible that schools are less able to make that personal connection with families; therefore, the best interactions, best meaning most effective, are those that deal with specific issues of discipline or academic problems, calling on un-emotional protocols. These can be procedural meetings that deal with specific causes and effects. This would shift the conversation from an open dialogue between teachers/administrators and teachers to the school simply informing parents of the event and the consequences. Rather than a dialogue, the interaction is an impersonal debriefing.

Parent Education

Discussion on the default procedures that have arisen in the parent-teacher conferences and meetings led the participants to express their expectations as well as the acknowledgement of great potential for schools to educate parents on educational practices, policies, and concerns. Adriana, a Hartford native of Puerto Rican descent, said, “If schools don’t think we’re smart enough, they should use the mandatory parent-teacher conferences to teach us. That way we can become partners in the learning process, express ourselves, and share our knowledge.”⁶

⁶ Interview with Adriana

Delci, whose son has ADD, said that the school does provide a translator for her meetings with her son's teacher.⁷ She finds the services satisfactory when she needs to understand the incident or issue at school and how the school prepares to accommodate her son's needs.⁸ However, she is not informed on treatment or educational plan options, nor is she asked for input. To help her son at home and in school, the school professionals could provide her with information on what she can do to encourage achievement in school.

The mothers saw the mandatory parent-teacher conferences as a vehicle for education on both ends. For the mothers, the school could inform them of their expectations, school policies, and school culture. For the schools, the mothers could share cultural values and practices that influence learning styles, share their experiences of learning and education in different countries (all of the mothers had at least one thing they could contribute to improve HPS based on their experiences in foreign school systems, as well as something HPS did better). This information sharing would help teachers determine what learning strategies best suit their students based on cultural knowledge and norms, and parents can learn how to be a contributing partner in the education by supporting school initiatives via understanding school programs, policies, and expectations. Many of the women described a situation where there is a cultural separation between white, English-speaking teachers who live in the suburbs and the urban, native Spanish-speaking Latin@ students. By approaching the parent-teacher conferences as a venue for communication and learning for parents and teachers, a

⁷ Interview with Delci 4/21/11

⁸ Interview with Delci 4/21/11

compromise and unity between the two sides can form a strong partnership that will benefit the education of the child.

Fear

Of the seven women interviewed, only two attended PTA meetings at the schools. Their reasons for not attending ranged from an inability to make it due to work schedule conflicts, to a lack of information about the meeting times, to the inability to understand enough English to get anything out of the meeting. Aurelia, a Puerto Rican migrant, said “I didn’t go to the PTA meetings until I knew enough English to really understand what they were saying. It would be embarrassing to look dumb in front of other parents.”⁹ Many women were afraid of their ignorance, which also showed that they equated intelligence with the ability to express oneself. The social pressures to fit in among other parents and in the school community kept mothers quiet, limiting their ability and confidence to express their views, experiences, and knowledge. Yolanda, another migrant from Puerto Rico commented:

I asked the PTA if they could have a translator for meetings, but they told me ‘No, in America we do it in English.’ I’m from Puerto Rico, but I may as well be from another country. Unless you speak English, to them, you are not American... My first priority when I moved here was to work and support my children, now I am learning the English part. To them, if I didn’t learn it right away, they think I don’t care. That I’m too lazy to try to do it their way.¹⁰

⁹ Interview with Aurelia

¹⁰ Interview with Yolanda

This quote illuminates the social pressures felt by new arrivals to the Hartford community. The lack of sympathy towards the mothers as they tried to settle into a new city, financially support their families, and learn a new language made the transition more challenging and pushed them away from school interactions.

Another form of fear, was the fear of drawing attention to themselves via their inability to speak English. In respect to their privacy, no interview questions were directed towards determining the legal status of any of the immigrants in the study. However, many women became physically and emotionally uncomfortable when talking about interactions with the schools and language barriers. Their fear of either standing out or being questioned deterred them from making any negative comments. Most of the women were reticent to say anything negative about the schools to me and a fervent appreciation of the schools. It seems that this fear dictates a perspective of inferiority and acceptance of the status quo.

This perspective was best embodied in the interview with Aurelia, a Puerto Rican migrant. She has full citizenship as a Puerto Rican citizen, yet she refused to say anything bad about the schools. She commented, “I really can say nothing bad about the school. The teachers are really helpful and supportive. Nothing bad.”¹¹ However, these labels of helpful and supportive are placed on a school that refuses to provide Spanish translators. Therefore, “helpful and supportive” teachers are those who talk slowly and use simple English words. The fear alters the way in which they see their rights as parents and members of the school community, leading them to accept an incomplete school service

¹¹ Interview with Aurelia

policy. This appears to be more of mentality of one who is simply grateful to receive anything rather than a partner in education.

Yanette, whose son attends school in West Hartford, where only 17% of the students speak another language at home, has a sharper perspective on her position in the eyes of the school (SSP Hall). The following dialogue during our interview illustrates what she says is a view common among her friends towards their role as parents in the schools. My question (KA) is a response to her suggestion about a curriculum change to the way the teacher is organizing lessons:

KA: Would you ever tell that to a teacher?

YB: No, that is the first time I've ever said that (English)

KA: Why? Because you're shy? Or you don't feel comfortable or no one would listen to you?

YB: (Spanish, jokingly) They'll never listen. No non-English speaker has ever revolutionized the school system, so why should I start?¹²

The fear of engagement and exposure seems to have created a mentality of separation between personal opinions and public action. The mothers do not seem to connect their rights to be partners in their children's education with their opinions.

Intra-Cultural Tension Among Latinas

This theme came out in the subtle tones, expressions, and hesitations in the interviews. Adriana, a Hartford native of Puerto Rican descent, made a comment that powerfully brought this issue to light:

I hear a lot of women grumbling about the school in Spanish, but to be honest, I think they are too afraid to speak up. They're illegal immigrants. They would rather complain about their kids' teachers, than actually complain and risk ruining their opportunity to go to school at all.¹³

¹² Interview with Yanetter 4/14/11

¹³ Interview with Adriana

The blame and the judgment towards other ethnic groups within the Latin@ community illuminated the tensions surrounding the issue of who is responsible for claim rights.

Adriana expressed dissatisfaction with the ways in which mothers were approaching their children's educations. She mentioned that they are afraid to education themselves for fear of drawing questions and attention to their legal status.¹⁴ All of the women identified the parent groups of their own descent as the most active parents in the community. There was also mention, by Marcella a newly arrived immigrant from Colombia that the Puerto Rican and African America parents seemed to be on the same page and were often hostile to the other Latin@ parents in the community.¹⁵ This shows that, while lumped together as one cohesive unit, there are tensions within the Latin@ population, based on seniority in the community and national origin. Many mothers also mentioned that there is a strong separation between newly arrived immigrants, settled or second generation immigrants, and native residents. Within the group schools label as the "minority" student population, there exist tensions and blaming perspectives that divide groups based on ethnicity, language, and seniority in the community.

CONCLUSION

For these women, language is a barrier to their expression of concern, innovation, and experience from other education systems and cultures. Their language is not only an untapped resource, but it is cause for the mothers to doubt their ability to make an impact on their children's educations. Many of them mentioned relationships or the desire for a

¹⁴ Interview with Adriana

¹⁵ Interview with Marcella

relationship with a bilingual individual that they would partner with to critique the system. They mentioned that most efforts were done on an individual basis, and that confronting the schools with limited English language ability was a daunting task when recommending changes in school culture or curriculum. Schools have the opportunity to educate parents in the knowledge and skills they need to fully express themselves, creating an education partnership. There is a source of knowledge and energy in the Hartford community untapped due to an inability of each group to connect in an open, meaningful way with the other.

From here, what would it take (in terms of attitudes and resources) to engage the knowledge and energy of these mothers, on the part of the school, other parents, and the parents themselves? A liaison, fluent in both languages and cultures is the ideal figure to bring together the expectations, hesitations, and concerns of all members of a school community.

The biggest question remaining, however, demands who has the responsibility to claim and acknowledge rights? Is it the role of the schools to enumerate every role, right, and expectation of parents? There is a disconnect between the right of all children residing in the United States to a free, public education and the ability of their parents to participate in that education process. When all children in the United States, regardless of legal status, are given the right to a free public education, to what degree does that right extend to their parents to claim the full rights of a parent as a citizen of a school community? If American public schools are to be the foundation of the American Dream and democracy, all parents must be treated as equal citizens of the schools, regardless of legal citizenship status. But, can there be a separation between citizenship in a school

democracy and legal citizenship of a nation? This study provides insight into the perspectives of Latina mothers in a transnational city who are struggling to participate in school communities. Moving forward, these observations and themes show that schools and parents must find a way to establish, acknowledge, and claim the rights of all members of the community in order to include all parents in the education process.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions:

1. What was your favorite part about school as a child? Least favorite? How does that compare to what your children would answer of their experience in Hartford Public Schools?
2. Describe your education history and experiences.
3. What do you see as the purpose of education?
4. What are the top three things your children learn at home?
5. What can you teach your child that his/her teacher cannot?
6. What made you decide to enroll in an English language acquisition course?
7. In what ways do you see the HPS as open to parent involvement? Closed?
8. Have you ever attended a PTA meeting? If so, describe the meeting.
9. Are you provided with all of the materials you need to fully understand your child's academic progress? In no, explain.
10. Do you try to speak English at home with your children?
11. Describe one of your parent-teacher conferences.
12. Have you ever approached a teacher with an issue about what your child is learning (content)? Have you ever approached a teacher with concerns about how your child is learning, where he might be struggling, etc?
13. How many children do you have in the public school system?
14. If given the option, describe what you see as the perfect learning setting.
15. Do you ever interact with parents of other races, ethnicities, through involvement?
16. Have you noticed a difference in the way in which parents of different races participate in the school setting?
17. Does the school treat parents of all racial, ethnic, economic, and cultural backgrounds the same way? Why or why not?
18. What is the most important part of community involvement?