24

PARENTS, ORGANIZED

Creating Conditions for Low-Income Immigrant Parent Engagement in Public Schools

Russell Carlock

Stray clouds float along the receding edge of a front that has scattered leaves over the puddled streets of the Mystic Public Housing Project in greater Boston. The sun is warm as I pass narrow, beige towers of apartment blocks connected by wide annexes of brick. A young boy yells in glee, chasing another child into a playground of blue metal swings and climbing apparatuses. On the edge of the playground, two girls with light brown skin dressed in blue jeans and bright blouses trade stickers from shiny books. Families stroll the sidewalks and converse in Creole, Spanish, Portuguese, and English.

The metal door creaks as I enter the Mystic Activity Room to teach an adult English class for immigrants called "Helping Your Children in School." The class is sponsored by a small nonprofit called the Welcome Project with a mission to "build the collective power of Somerville immigrants to participate in and shape community decisions." At around 9:00 in the morning, the parents begin entering, some pushing baby strollers, others chatting with friends. Judith, a grandmother from Brazil with short white hair, sits beside me. She punches me lightly on the arm and asks, "You have a good weekend?" Two young women in black hijabs converse in Arabic. By 9:15, 16 of us crowd around the plastic folding tables pushed together in a square. We represent 12 countries, 7 languages, and 5 continents. We discuss their children's progress in school and ideas for how to improve public education.

The parents I taught from 2010 to 2012 in my adult English class sponsored by the Welcome Project represented a significant and growing proportion of public school parents in the United States. They came to the United States in a period of immigration unparalleled in magnitude since the Industrial Revolution. They encountered an economy increasingly stratified between rich and poor, and like many other immigrant families, they lived in a low-income community with public schools that struggled to connect with them across divisions of language and class. As the numbers of children in low-income immigrant families increase, the question of how schools and families can partner across divisions of language and class to advance student learning becomes more important to ensure educational justice for immigrant families. In this

chapter I address this question by connecting research on parent engagement to questions about power relationships in schools and describe three imperatives for strengthening the participation of low-income immigrant families in their children's education. I base my recommendations on what I learned from the low-income immigrants with whom I had an opportunity to work for two years as an adult English teacher. At the end of the chapter, I provide a list of action items schools may adopt to build partnerships with immigrant parents across language and class.

Across the country, many schools struggle to engage low-income immigrant parents. Research shows that low-income and immigrant parents are less likely to be involved in school-based activities than their native-born, wealthier peers (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Shuang & Koblinsky, 2009; Soomin & Wang, 2006; Stevenson & Baker, 1987), reflecting stereotypes that low-income immigrants are less engaged in their children's education. These stereotypes, however, overlook the fact that low-income immigrant parents are more likely to be involved in children's education at home (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007) and often have higher educational aspirations for children than their native-English-speaking peers (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2007). Unfortunately, studies of parent involvement in schools rarely examine the types of relationships between school personnel and parents that lead to family engagement or disengagement in school activities. Because one in four children in the United States is the child of an immigrant and many of these children live in poor communities (Passel, 2011; Walters & Trevelyan, 2011), it is imperative that we strengthen collaboration between schools and low-income immigrant parents if we hope to achieve equity in education.

It can happen. My students from the Mystic Public Housing Project taught me that schools, families, and communities *can* collaborate across differences of class, ethnicity, and language to improve education for all students. Most of my students were single mothers struggling as both primary caregivers and wage earners for their families. When I began teaching our English class, they often did not participate in activities at their children's school, though it was only a few hundred meters from their homes. Some people outside of the community referred to Mystic parents as an "absent voice" from the discussions that took place among teachers and other parents at the school. Many, including myself, assumed the parents from the housing project did not participate in school activities because of barriers of time, education, child care, resources, and English fluency.

But I learned that power relationships can be just as important as these other factors in determining parents' engagement in school. Though my students were "poor" by U.S. standards of living, they did not consider themselves poor, especially relative to what they had experienced in their countries of origin.

They were strong, focused, and determined. They had clear ideas for what they believed was best for their children. But they experienced discrimination in the community, making many of them question their roles in their new country. They felt disempowered and separated from their community. They had little control over institutions of law enforcement, schools, and the city council, even as they struggled with crime, failing schools, and reduced access to public services. In their native countries, they had experienced military dictatorships where critical participation in public institutions was often dangerous, so they were reluctant to voice dissent to public officials. In short, despite their talents and strengths, they had few opportunities to channel these resources into solving community problems. To engage these parents in school and bring educational justice to their community, we need to change their power relationships among themselves and with their children's school, which is just as important as their overcoming their community's lack of material resources.

Upon meeting other parents with similar challenges, the parents in my class developed a mutual support network and became active in their children's school. They attended school events in groups, bolstered by solidarity with one another. They demanded high-quality interpretation and translation services so they could share ideas with school personnel and other parents. Their collective participation led to a shift in power: Teachers and administrators began to collaborate with Mystic parents to make decisions about their children's education. They worked together to incorporate the strengths of the Mystic community into their children's school to improve education for all children. A change in parents' relationships with one another, coupled with responsiveness on the part of the school, led to a more democratic representation of parents in the neighborhood school.

As the most ubiquitous of public institutions, the public school can be a nexus of community action to challenge inequity in and out of school. Changing the way that schools and parents interact across language and class can be difficult, because it often requires administrators and teachers to put forth greater effort to reach out to parents and to relinquish some of their power in school. Educators must make significant changes to how they interact with parents to build new relationships that facilitate communication and shared decision making. In this chapter, I argue that, at the very least, we must (a) ensure language justice for all parents, (b) acknowledge the strengths of parents' communities, and (c) foster parent participation in school decision making.

Ensure Language Justice for All Parents

Lupe Ojeda immigrated to the United States in the '90s. She had been laid off from a factory job in Mexico after it was taken over by a U.S. company. Her

neighbor, Maryann Vo, came to the United States as a refugee from the Vietnam War. Her father fought for the south and then was jailed after the fall of Saigon. Before knowing each other, they felt disempowered in their children's school because no interpretation services were available to them and no other parents from their community attended. On the rare occasions when they attended events at school, they felt isolated and frustrated by the language barriers they encountered.

In their community, however, they developed a friendship that transcended language, sharing recipes and cooking for each other's families. They began to attend school events together and advocated for interpretation and translation in the community's languages so that other parents would attend as well. Their participation stemmed from their solidarity and allowed them to improve interpretation and translation at their children's school. As a result of their advocacy, increased access to multilingual communication spawned growing participation by many other immigrant parents from the public housing community.

Parent engagement and disengagement often result from the social environments parents encounter at school. School personnel often believe that poor and immigrant parents do not attend school events because they don't care about education, because they are uneducated, or because barriers in their lives prevent them from attending. Less often do they consider how school communications and events can make parents feel unwelcome. United States schools often privilege English as the language of dominance for parent participation in school. Only rarely are school forms sent home to parents in their native language, and even if they are, the translations are of such poor quality or use language at such a formal register that parents find them difficult to understand. Districts often do not provide teachers and parents a clear system for requesting trained, impartial interpreters to facilitate communication for regular conferences or emergency communication needs. Back-to-school nights, PTA meetings, and other events for parents tend to occur in English only, with no plan for interpreting for and welcoming parents from other language backgrounds. Because of the difficulty of communicating with parents who do not speak English, monolingual English-speaking school personnel may be less likely to engage these parents in decision making about their children's education. Language and power go hand in hand. If a person's language is not connected to the decision-making apparatus of a community, that person is effectively disempowered. This lack of language justice disproportionately impacts low-income immigrant parents' ability to advocate for their children and contribute to their school's improvement, because these parents have fewer opportunities to learn English because of longer work hours and jobs that do not provide paid leave or professional development. Nearly all immigrants to the United States *want* to learn English, but this process can take up to seven years even with dedicated study. Low-income immigrants are more likely to live in linguistically and ethnically

segregated communities with less access to quality adult education and thus are more likely to feel linguistically isolated in English-only environments.

Parents attend school events when they know they will not be isolated because of their language. They attend when they feel confident they will share the space with other parents who live in their neighborhood, whose children are in the same programs, and who attend the same community events. They participate in school events in solidarity with others to build relationships that will support their children. If parents cannot participate in this social aspect of school engagement, then they are not likely to be aware of or able to support school initiatives to advance student learning. So, as a very basic starting point, we must examine school events that ostensibly are organized to encourage parent involvement to ensure they are equally welcoming to all parents.

The first step to improving parent engagement across language and class is to ensure language justice by adopting systems of interpretation and translation that allow parents to participate in the language that is most comfortable for them. Lupe, Maryann, and other parents in my class collaborated with the Welcome Project to bring simultaneous interpretation to community forums with school personnel. The Welcome Project provided fairly inexpensive radio transmitters with headsets to enable these events to be accessible across multiple languages simultaneously. Bilingual community youth provided simultaneous interpretation so that school principals, elected officials, teachers, and parents could converse across languages in the Mystic community. For parent-teacher conferences, the school offered greater access to professional interpreters. This improved communication created a positive feedback loop: More parents attended school events because they knew their voices would be heard, and their greater participation, in turn, drove the school to continue improving its multilingual communication systems.

Many politicians and school personnel do not see interpretation and translation as budget items of primary importance, even as some of them disparage parents for not attending school events, do not strive to become multilingual themselves, and do not advocate for improved labor conditions or high-quality adult education that would allow parents working in low-wage jobs to study English. This misunderstanding of the challenges facing low-income immigrant parents who strive to provide the best education they can for their children blinds us to the immense benefits of a truly multilingual community in public education. Multilingual communication facilitates improved understanding among educators of students and creates a public space for parent solidarity that is a stepping-stone to shifting ossified school structures that contribute to educational inequity. An active parent community is vital for holding schools accountable for student learning and for ensuring that local community knowledge is available to help solve the problems facing educators struggling to meet the needs of all students.

In addition to providing simultaneous interpretation so that parents and school officials can hold discussions in which each participant can use the language in which he or she feels most comfortable, schools can use other strategies to change the dynamics of language dominance in a school's community. School personnel can visit low-income immigrant communities where English is not the dominant language and seek to become multilingual themselves or to provide their own interpreters so that they can participate in events in these communities. They can collaborate with immigrant organizations to invite large groups of parents to schools to share their concerns with school personnel. In these events, interpreters would primarily serve the monolingual school staff so that they could understand and respond to parent concerns.

As educators we must shift our implicit beliefs about language dominance. This begins by realizing that interpretation and translation are necessary, not only because an immigrant parent might not speak English but also because school personnel do not speak parents' languages. In this sense, interpretation and translation are services not solely for immigrant parents but for all parties who need to understand one another in order to embark on a common endeavor. In the case of schools, interpretation and translation is the first step toward creating a multilingual community that can collaborate across language and class to provide engaging learning opportunities for all students and confront larger community problems that contribute to educational inequity.

Focus on Community Strength

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center in Boston is composed of a series of towering brown concrete edifices rising from beside the interstate that passes along the edge of the city's high rises. A 5-foot-thick, 25-foot-high wall surrounds much of the complex and stretches along its corrugated concrete exterior. On a cold spring day, members of my English class and more than 50 others gathered along the sidewalk outside the prison to protest the detentions of the more than 200 undocumented workers awaiting their deportation hearings inside. Among the prisoners was the spouse of one of the members of our class. When her community discovered what had happened, members rallied around her family, donating food and clothing and offering advice about immigration law. They watched her children, cooked for her family, provided transportation, and helped her family by doing household chores. Their strength sustained her family through its crisis.

My students taught me a valuable lesson about the incredible strength present in their community. When I began teaching my course, I first viewed my students and their community as people who needed help. I saw through a prism of deficit and sought to get them involved in their children's school before

understanding their goals for themselves. Like many service providers, I created a plan to help the community without first considering the wide diversity of strengths and experiences of its members or the "funds of knowledge" already in use to solve their problems (Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992). These funds were the myriad strategies the parents already used to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

I learned to step back and follow the parents' interests. I respected their strengths and sought to collaborate *with them* rather than dictate *to them*. I retreated from my focus on outcomes and strived to *listen* rather than *lead*. This helped create a classroom community of parents who shared their strengths with one another and improved their community. Those with more child-rearing experience helped those just beginning as parents, those with jobs helped those looking for work, and those with more time in the United States helped newcomers. They shared child care, rides, and advice about navigating their children's school.

This mutual support was evidence against a myth of cultural deficiency among poor communities. Many educators and others in positions of power tend to stereotype low-income immigrant communities as I did: as needing help and being deficient in capacity to assist in their children's education. These communities are not deprived of assets, however, so much as they are deprived of opportunities to share these assets with the larger community and opportunities to have their strengths recognized by people in positions of power.

Teachers often think of poor, immigrant parents as lacking the tools necessary to effectively engage with their children's education. These perspectives reinforce power inequalities and the prominent idea that poor communities are in need of *intervention*—a term from the health field that connotes sickness. But poor communities are not sick. A society of extreme inequality is sick. Effective interventions to address social inequality must target *the sickness that plagues all of society* rather than only poor people. Many programs that try to engage these parents attempt to fill what they perceive as holes in these communities as compared with middle-class, native-English-speaking communities. For example, family literacy programs often attempt to teach immigrant parents to speak and read to their children in English rather than focus on their ability to teach their native language, despite the metacognitive benefits of multilingualism, the importance of language in a child's relationship with his or her caregivers, and copious research showing that native-language literacy in early childhood does not interfere with second-language acquisition and is the most important factor in developing literacy in any language, including English. Similarly, school personnel might lament that poor immigrant children come to school speaking little English but do not realize that monolingual English-speaking children are often even more lacking in multilingual ability than their poor immigrant peers.

To shift dynamics of inequality in schools, educators must focus on the strengths of parents and incorporate these into school pedagogy. Rather than assuming, for example, that a mother from rural El Salvador who does not speak English and has low levels of Spanish literacy has nothing to contribute, a teacher could learn on a home visit that such a mother has a thriving garden she uses to treat common illnesses among neighbors. The teacher could invite the mother to help children create their own herb garden and teach about the healing properties of common plants.

Instead of believing that speaking a language other than English is a deficit that must be overcome, teachers could recognize an opportunity for monolingual English-speaking children to learn the languages of their peers and their peers' parents. A dual- or multilanguage curriculum could honor the native languages of the community's members and foster multilingualism and academic achievement for all. In a dual-language program, all children are language learners, and their achievement is defined by their ability to shift across multiple languages rather than by their mastery of a dominant language spoken in the homes of only some students. Such a program builds on the strengths of the community to offer all students the academic and social benefits of becoming multilingual.

By recognizing the strengths of parents, rather than casting their differences as deficits, schools can build authentic community partnerships that benefit all children. Power does not have to be zero-sum, such that recognizing the benefits of other languages reduces the academic successes of English-speaking children. Rather, hierarchical power relationships can be recast as reciprocal, and formerly segregated communities can come together to achieve higher goals. If school personnel improve their relationships with low-income immigrant communities, they may discover the vast social and cultural resources that exist in these communities and the values of sharing and mutual support that characterize many of their relationships. These values and resources can become part of the school's culture as well through opportunities for parent volunteering in the classroom and connections among curriculum, pedagogy, and the day-to-day lives of students who come from these communities. Schools that integrate the strengths of all parents become communities that honor the diversity of immigration and break down disparities across social class and language that perpetuate injustice and inequality in education.

Embrace Democracy in Parent Engagement

On a cool New England evening, four women from my English class attended a district school committee meeting in the neighborhood school library to advocate for the improvement of interpretation and translation at all district schools. They wanted schools to recognize the value of the diversity of the community

that represented more than 50 languages and teach children about this cultural resource. They had knocked on the doors of their neighbors in a letter-writing campaign and sent over 100 letters to school committee members to share their ideas. They now waited eagerly to hear whether their letters had the intended impact.

In response to the parents' campaign, the district enforced a policy requiring interpretation in Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish at all PTA meetings and parent-teacher conferences. When the meeting concluded, the mothers celebrated months of relationship building, planning, writing, and deliberating to improve their community and their children's school.

The parents' participation in the decision making regarding their children's school was a small example of the kind of political participation that is necessary for bringing equity to education. Since the early days of the U.S. republic, democratic theorists have explained democracy's strength by its ability to engage people who are most affected by social problems in the resolution of those problems (Addams, 1902; De Tocqueville, 1835; Gaventa, 2006; Manor, 2004). There was a time when "democracy" was a privilege reserved for White, propertied men. Through organizing among excluded groups, however, democracy is slowly becoming more democratic. Hallmarks of a successful democracy include deliberation, collaboration, and action. Unfortunately, public schools rarely engage poor or immigrant parents in the resolution of educational problems, even though their families are most harshly affected by educational inequities. Making matters worse, children in poor communities attend schools that are less likely than the schools attended by their wealthier peers to provide opportunities to participate in school decision making (Hess & Leal, 2001). This disparity is even more glaring for poor immigrant communities, in which many members cannot vote or run for office in local elections and are separated from decision-making bodies not only by class but also by language. Democratic theory predicts that such a system will lead to a disparity in efficiency and quality between public education for wealthy, native-English-speaking students and that for students from poor immigrant communities (Ackerman, 2004; Dorner, 2010; Fung & Wright, 2001; Skocpol, 2003). Such is the system we presently have.

Historically, inequalities in power have been ameliorated through community organizing, and schools have been sites of these struggles. Both the civil rights and chicana/chicano movements used the basic principles of community organizing to transform public education. They built new partnerships among people and channeled relationships into activism to shift inequities in power (Ganz, 2002). Schools marked by inequity across divisions of race, ethnicity, language, and class can learn from this organizing and apply it to help all students succeed (Warren & Mapp, 2011). The challenges facing parents who wish to participate in schools to help their children are challenges to democracy.

Educators and parents must work together to overcome these challenges and ensure participation in school decision making by all parents, regardless of their language, ethnicity, or class.

Teachers and administrators can begin the process of democratizing schools by transforming school-based parent events into opportunities for authentic deliberation toward a vision for children's education. Most back-to-school nights, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences reinforce hierarchy, placing school personnel in the role of expert and parents in the role of passive recipient of a public service. These events might, instead, become opportunities to hear parents' goals and expectations for children's learning and to begin equitable partnerships to attain these goals. Schools can invite community organizations run by immigrants to participate in the planning and implementation of parent events. School systems can invite community-led organizations to conduct independent "equity audits" of parent participation, with suggestions for how to change structures that prevent parents from participating. These investments in engaging parents across language and class will pay dividends by creating a better-connected school community with greater capacity to advance the learning of all students. When parents participate in forming and implementing school policy for the benefit of their own children, the policies are more likely to produce equitable outcomes.

The challenges facing low-income immigrant communities are many and great: unfair labor practices, a broken immigration system, linguistic and ethnic discrimination, growing economic inequality, and diminished access to quality public services and democratic institutions. Public schools, however, can be sites for mitigating these challenges. With authentic collaboration between educators and families, schools can become models of a multilingual democracy that embraces the strengths of the entire community to protect and develop its most important asset: its children. One of my students told me, "La union hace la fuerza." Union makes strength. If schools do not strive to unite their communities across all that divides them, how will they have the strength to ensure that all students achieve to their utmost potential regardless of where their parents live, how much money they have, or what languages they speak? Schools serving communities divided by class and language must begin the work of bridging these divides to realize the democratic vision of the public school as a foundation for equal opportunity.

I end by offering the following suggestions, not as a proscriptive guide but as a point of departure toward this kind of unification between schools and low-income immigrant families:

- Ensure language justice by offering high-quality interpretation and translation services in all parent communication.
- Provide opportunities for all parents to share their strengths in efforts to improve their children's school.

- Facilitate parent organizing by building relationships with and among parents during school-based events.
- Collaborate with immigrant community organizations on initiatives to make schools more welcoming.
- Work in solidarity with parents to overcome the causes of socioeconomic and linguistic inequity.
- Democratize parent engagement by responding to parent voices and ensuring authentic representation of all parents in school decision making.

References

Ackerman, J. (2004). Co-governance for accountability: Beyond "exit" and "voice." *World Development, 32*(3), 447–463.

Addams, J. (1902). *Democracy and social ethics.* New York: Macmillan.

De Tocqueville, A. (1835). *Democracy in America.* New York: The Library of America.

Dorner, L. (2010). Contested communities in a debate over dual-language education: The import of "public" values on public policies. *Educational Policy, 25*(4), 577–613.

Fung, A., & Wright, E. (2001). Deepening democracy: Innovations in empowered participatory governance. *Politics and Society, 29*(5), 5–39.

Ganz, M. (2002, Fall). What is organizing? *Social Policy, 33*(1), 16–17.

Gaventa, J. (2006). *Triumph, deficit or contestation? Deepening the "deepening democracy" debate.* Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

Hess, F., & Leal, D. (2001). The opportunity to engage: How race, class, and institutions structure access to educational deliberation. *Educational Policy, 15*(3), 474–490.

Huntsinger, C., & Jose, P. (2009). Parental involvement in children's schooling: Different meanings in different cultures. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 24*, 398–410.

Ingram, M., Wolfe, R., & Lieberman, J. (2007). The role of parents in high-achieving schools serving low-income, at-risk populations. *Education and Urban Society, 39*(4), 479–497.

Kao, G., & Tienda, M. (1995). Optimism and achievement: The educational performance of immigrant youth. *Social Science Quarterly, 76*(1), 1–19.

Lareau, A., & Horvat, E. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education, 72*(1), 37–53.

Manor, J. (2004). Democratisation with inclusion: Political reforms and people's empowerment at the grassroots. *Journal of Human Development, 5*(1), 5–29.

Passel, J. S. (2011). Demography of immigrant youth: Past, present, and future. *Future Child, 21*(1), 19–41.
Schaller, A., Rocha, L., & Barshinger, D. (2007). Maternal attitudes and parent education: How immigrant mothers support their child's education despite their own levels of education. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 34*(5), 351–356.
Shuang, C., & Koblinsky, S. (2009). Parent involvement in children's education: An exploratory study of urban, Chinese immigrant families. *Urban Education, 44*(6), 687–709.
Skocpol, T. (2003). *Diminished democracy: From membership to management in American civic life.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
Soomin, S., & Wang, C. (2006). Immigrant parents' involvement in American schools: Perspectives from Korean mothers. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 34*(2), 125–132.
Stevenson, D., & Baker, D. (1987). The family-school relation and the child's school performance. *Child Development, 58*(5), 1348–1357.
Vélez-Ibañez, C., & Greenberg, J. (1992). Formation and transformation of funds of knowledge among U.S.-Mexican households. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 23*, 313–335.
Walters, N., & Trevelyan, E. (2011). *The newly arrived foreign-born population of the United States: 2010* (American Community Survey Briefs). Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
Warren, M., & Mapp, K. (2011). *A match on dry grass: Community organizing as a catalyst for school reform.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.