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ABSTRACT

This study presents a report on parents' participation in a leadership-development project in which parents constructed their own leadership roles for improving children's educational opportunities and outcomes. The text focuses on parents working in collaboration with other parents, school administrators, and university faculty and staff. The paper presents a brief review of parent-involvement literature as related to parents' participation in local school leadership roles. It describes the 3-year collaboration between Center X of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA and two high school complexes in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The goals of the collaboration were to provide parents with substantive knowledge about changes in curriculum and instruction and how these changes supported education for social justice. The preliminary themes that emerged from a collaborative investigation centered around how a small group of diverse parents began to use the knowledge they gained to construct new or redefined leadership roles for themselves. The importance of using a professional-development approach for parent education in curricular and policy contexts is emphasized. (RJM)

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# Building Parent Leadership In Curriculum Reform Through School/University Collaboration

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to report on parents' participation in a leadership development project in which parents construct their own leadership roles for improving educational opportunities and outcomes for all children in collaboration with other parents, school administrators and university faculty and staff. This paper will first present a brief review of parent involvement literature related to parents' participation in local school leadership roles. While the body of parent involvement literature is vast, there is little that addresses how parents acquire the actual content knowledge necessary to participate as equal partners in curricular and policy decisions. Next, we will describe the three-year collaboration between Center X of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA and two high school complexes in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The goals of the collaboration were to provide parents with substantive knowledge about changes in curriculum and instruction and how these changes can support education for social justice. The paper then outlines the preliminary themes that emerge from our collaborative investigation on how a small group of these diverse parents begin to use the knowledge they have gained to construct new or re-defined leadership roles for themselves. In our concluding comments we will discuss the importance of using a professional development approach for parent education in curricular and policy contexts and our own reflections on the process we have engaged in with these parents.

## **Selected Literature on Parent Involvement**

Parent involvement literature spans many areas from how to improve children's learning at home to coordinating social services with schools to support disadvantaged families. Parent involvement, as a critical component of student achievement, has been well documented in an extensive review by Henderson and Berla (1995). Other important research has shown that parents

become involved in schooling on behalf of their children if they believe that an active role is permissible, important and necessary, if they feel they can have a positive influence on their children's education and finally, if they perceive their children and the school want them involved.(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) Some of the best known work on parent involvement is Epstein's six types of parent involvement. These six types of involvement include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community. (Epstein, 1995) Our interest in the literature is related to Epstein's parent involvement "Type 5", which focuses on decision making, parental input into policies that affect children's education and developing parent leaders and representatives.

With increasing emphasis on parents' participation in restructuring and decentralization reforms, we looked to the literature on parents and local school governance. While research has supported parents' roles in governance and policy decisions as a means of building mutual trust and respect among educators and families and breaking down the feelings of alienation often found among disadvantaged and minority parents (Comer, 1984), it has also noted that mandates for parent participation, absent provisions of training for educators and parents, will not lead to the desired levels of collaboration. (Cochran & Dean, 1991; McLaughlin & Shields, 1987; Moles, 1993) In their study of site-based councils, Malen and Ogawa (1988) found that even with some training, parents did not have significant influence on the governance councils. But they do note that parent interviews repeatedly requested more training.

Fine's critique of parent involvement argues that "the presumption of equality between parents and schools, and the refusal to address power struggles, has systematically undermined real educational transformation. . . [Parents] rarely seem entitled to strong voices and substantial power . . . [and] rarely do they have the opportunity to work collaboratively with educators inventing what could be a rich, engaging, and democratic system for public education." (Fine, 1993 p. 684-85) She also states that parents do not ever "enter the school-based discourses of current reform movements." (p. 684) She goes on to describe her participation as a consultant in a school district establishing shared decision making and school-based management and her

observation that parents would “not know all they need to know to make serious educational decisions” (p. 694). Similarly, Carr writes: “It is no longer appropriate for educational researchers and change agents to ‘own’ certain knowledge and information about change.” (Carr, 1995 p. 11) Without this knowledge, she found that minority parent representatives were dropping out of decision making teams because they lacked the confidence for full participation in change processes (Carr, 1996).

Sarason has also written about parents lack of real participation in school decision making. He incorporates the political principle into parent involvement in schools: When decisions are made affecting parents and their children, parents should have a role and a voice in the decision-making process. (Sarason, 1995) He adds that if parents had a role in policy and decision-making, they would better understand why educators think and act the way they do. But he also states that parents need to know what they are seeking power for, what are the substantive issues? His statement that school board members know what superintendents and school people want them to know, can be applied just as easily to parents’ knowledge of schools.

Generally, this body of literature suggests that parents may receive some training on how to participate on governance councils but that parents, and poor and minority parents in particular, do not have the important knowledge which would allow them to confidently and effectively collaborate with educators on important reform issues. Just how parents can get full information on substantive issues is seldom addressed in parent involvement literature.

As Epstein emphasizes, partnerships between parents and schools bring with them new challenges, redefinitions of issues and problems and new understandings of stakeholders’ activities and roles when schools engage parents in decision making. (Epstein, 1995) This is particularly the case if family/school partnerships are going to focus on curriculum and instructional reforms. Some of the recent research on parent involvement is beginning to look at how parents’ individual beliefs and attitudes affect their understanding and support of curricular reform (Dodd, 1997; Konzal, 1997a; Konzal, 1997b) and suggests school communities include parents early on during processes of curricular change. Konzal’s research on parents’ understandings of curriculum reform

found that because parents advocate for what they believe is in their child's best interest, time must be spent involving parents in dialogue about changes in teaching and learning practices "especially those practices that push against the expectations and values of parents, those that rewrite the schooling script" (Konzal, 1997b p. 19) She suggests parent/school relationships be based on a model of community "where parents advocate for their child and for all children, parents-as-community member." (p. 20, her emphasis)

The call for a community model of open dialogue about teaching and learning will be a challenge for schools because as Henry points out, in competitive bureaucracies, moves to collaborative, participatory decision-making can still become 'turf wars' as administrators and teachers perceive "too much information can be given to parents and community that may make school operations unworkable." (Henry, 1996 p. 73) Henry highlights key issues when she writes:

Schools do not always attend to the diverse cultures, goals, talents, and needs of *all* children and their parents. . . A shift must occur to constitute a pluralistic community and to balance power more equitably between professional educators and parents. Building a culture of inclusive community has to be a key goal of administrators and teachers. With site-based management and the inclusion of parents in decision making, new demands are placed on administrators to approach school governance from a participatory stance. (Henry, 1996 p. 102-3, italics hers)

Dykstra and Fege (1997) suggested in *Education Week* that educational and community leaders should engage in dialogue about the goals of schooling. They spoke of the need to attend to the tough issues facing public education with parents and community members, and build reform ownership with people at the local level as partners. We still know little about how locally involved parents can be representative of other parents or how they can develop leadership roles which work to include the voice and concerns of the diverse parent community in educational reform.

These studies which propose community models of collaborative decision-making point out that knowledge about teaching and learning is important to ensure that parent involvement in school governance does not reinforce the existing power structures in schools or continue to favor only those families already benefitting from traditional educational practices. They make clear the

need to better understand how parents can be involved as decision makers who represent the needs of all parents' children, not just their own.

This literature suggests rethinking parent leadership roles more along the lines of the discourse on empowering or transformative leadership applied to educators involved in reform. (i.e., Fullan, 1991; Fullan, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1992) It means helping parents work for social justice education as well. We need new models of parent involvement which support parents as important decision-makers, but also help parents redefine their roles so they act in ways that promote equal access to educational opportunity for all students. As the research points out, working in collaboration with educators to accomplish these educational goals will be a challenge for parents. It will require them to think more like public policy makers than self-interested parent advocates. This is a major shift for parents, one they cannot make without increased objectivity stemming from more knowledge of curriculum, which more than any other area of schooling, has been usually guarded as the domain of professional educators.

The project reported on below developed with many of these concerns in mind. Center X, a professional development and teacher education unit within UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, is grounded in principles that include social justice, collaboration, and the integration of research and practice. A key focus of programs at Center X is improving the educational opportunities of disadvantaged urban students. With major restructuring taking place in Los Angeles schools, Center X was able to extend its professional development resources to a partnership with local high school complexes interested in addressing new strategies of parent education on teaching and learning. The school /university partnership was positioned to foster parents' learning about curriculum and instructional reform, and hopefully, shift parents' advocacy to education for social justice. Our study tells how we have attempted to meet this critical challenge with intervention and action research.<sup>1</sup>

## **School/University Collaboration Brings Curriculum and Policy Knowledge to Parents**

Los Angeles Unified School District continues to engage in efforts toward decentralizing control. In addition to the LEARN<sup>ii</sup> reform launched over five years ago, the district reorganized its administrative structure into “clusters” and “complexes”<sup>iii</sup> of schools in 1994, to move decision-making into school communities. These complexes are governed by “instructional cabinets” which include representation from all stakeholder groups: administrators, teachers, parents, classified personnel, and high school students. As many schools and clusters sought parents to take active roles in local school leadership, they faced the additional task of educating parents in the complex on the various changes taking place in public schools.

The search for knowledgeable parent representatives to serve on these new leadership councils revealed the limited amount of attention paid in the past to developing parents' understanding of the goals and purpose of educational reforms and policies. The "parents-as-partners" dialogue taking place in the education reform efforts of Los Angeles assumed that parents would have access to substantive information about their children's classrooms and schools. In the early meetings of one cluster's reorganization, we listened to parents express concerns that their previous parental involvement experiences rarely provided them opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of today's educational issues and alerted us to the work that would be needed for parents to be truly informed participants and equal partners.

The Davis/Wagner cluster is the site of our study. The diversity of the cluster is fairly representative of the diversity within the city, though the Hispanic population in Los Angeles is certainly much greater. The racial diversity of the cluster includes 28.7% African American students, 9% Asian students, 34.1% Latina/Latino students, 26.2% White students, 1.2% Filipino students, .4% Pacific Islander and .3% American Indian/Alaska Native students. The two high school complexes, Davis High School and Wagner High School, together enroll over 22,000 students, and have a history of welcoming reform and its faculty members developing innovative instructional programs at its many school sites. The cluster is home to magnet programs, charter



programs, LEARN schools, and traditional schools with reputations for taking the lead in designing and implementing curricular and instructional changes to benefit the highly diverse student population of the district. Unfortunately, the cluster also has experienced the resegregating effects of high achieving students leaving neighborhood schools for the “better” magnet or charter programs and has a well-established system of tracking students into an extensive offering of honors and AP courses. Of the 28 K-12 schools that make up the cluster, student test scores are highest among the Asian and White students.

As the schools in each of the complexes began to work together, they found that the very diversity of their families as well as the variety of programs offered at school sites offered mixed blessings. Maintaining the integrity and uniqueness of the many schools’ individual programs while learning to think and work together on behalf of all students in each of the complex’s schools was a challenge for principals, teachers and staff, but was even more of a challenge for the diverse parent population. Informal conversations led us to suspect that the diverse group of recruited parents participated on separate councils for categorical programs such as Title I, or bilingual programs, or were involved in PTA and other local school councils. Few had participated across racial, linguistic, and social class boundaries inherent in the different parent involvement programs. As the complexes brought parent representatives of its different schools together, it became clear that many parents lacked information about basic issues of curriculum and instruction and had very different personal experiences regarding access to quality educational programs in their schools.

In collaboration with UCLA and the Davis/Wagner Cluster, a parent education model was developed, the UCLA Parent Curriculum Project, where parents could have access to the kinds of information and networking which allows them to become knowledgeable participants in local school reform, as well as advocates for improved teaching and learning for all students. The California Subject Matter Projects which are a part of Center X, have been offering successful professional development programs in all disciplines to teachers in LAUSD over the past 15 years.

As a result, there exists a large corp of teacher-leaders in curriculum and instructional reform. We envisioned the same for parents.

We have found a couple of similar models which are close to what we planned for parents. In an elementary school in Milwaukee, parents participated in a six-week project where they wrote about their families and discussed school issues (Peterson, 1992). James Vopat developed the idea further in The Parent Project , (Vopat, 1994) building teacher/parent/child partnerships in a workshop program based on the Milwaukee Writing Project. Daniels reports on how that model was adapted to help Chicago parents learn about curriculum reform. (Daniels, 1996) A program with an emphasis on governance issues, discipline, testing and other policy oriented topics was developed in New Jersey. (Fruchter, Silvestri, & Green, 1985)

Because our goal was to build parents' understanding of the various subject matter curricula, assessment reforms and related policy issues as well as to have a neutral and supportive environment in which parents could reflect on the implications these changes have on their leadership roles at local schools, we used the California Subject Matter Project Model for the parent projects. Using the same constructivist approach of the subject matter projects, where participants are engaged in a discovery process and through their own investigations help construct what matters, parents had the opportunity to collaborate with other parents, project directors, teachers, and schools involved in educational reform. The timing of the collaboration was particularly important because the district was implementing a comprehensive plan to incorporate its new learning standards in all its schools in the core subject areas of mathematics, language arts, science and history/social science.

#### The Davis/Wagner - UCLA Parent Curriculum Projects

The high school complexes participating in the projects recruited parents from all Pre-K through grade 12 schools. The 60 parent participants from the two projects included 19 African-Americans, 14 Latinos, 2 Iranian immigrants, 4 Koreans, 1 Native American/White and 20 White parents. Though the majority of participants were women, there were 2 White fathers, 2 African-American fathers, and 1 Latino father. There was also one custodial grandmother.

While the majority of the parents reported some college education or higher, there was a range of economic conditions for parents from three qualifying for AFDC to a cardiologist.

The Parent Curriculum Project is based on the beliefs that parents have an important role in assisting educators in assuring all students equal access to educational opportunities. Parents' racial, cultural, gender, class, and linguistic backgrounds were considered assets as was the wealth of experience, culture, and knowledge they had acquired throughout their lives. The projects supported Sarason's principle (1995) that planning for change in schools and communities must involve the parents affected by the change. Addressing Fine's (1993) and Carr's (1996) concerns, it supported the belief that all parents are capable of acquiring the understanding, knowledge, competence and confidence to become advocates for all children. We recognized that in order to implement curriculum reform for all children, parents must be part of the process.

Two Parent Curriculum Projects, one for each high school complex took place during the school years 1995-96 and 1996-97. The content of the projects focused on providing parents (and community members) who were involved or interested in becoming more involved in their children's schools, information regarding recent changes in curriculum content and instructional methodologies, i.e., district learning standards, state subject matter frameworks, authentic assessment, and multiple intelligences. It also provided parents an opportunity to analyze and reflect on how the issues of school restructuring, social justice and multiculturalism will affect their school communities. Parents attended three all day sessions, which included a field trip to observe classrooms in complex schools and ten, 3-hour weekly evening seminars. Parents participated in activities and discussions about language arts, history/social science, mathematics and science instruction. Guest speakers addressed issues such as Ebonics or non-standard English dialects, tracking, and student achievement data disaggregated by race and gender at the national, state and district/school level. Principals and teachers from outside the complexes sat on panels to answer parents questions about making changes in schools. The final seminars allowed parents to work with one another to develop action plans for sharing what they learned with other parents and to

assist in change processes in their school communities. Parents were paid a stipend at the completion of the project.

At the conclusion of the parent curriculum projects, we examined our notes and parent participants' various writings from journals and assignments, action plans and evaluations to learn more about the professional development model as it applied to parent education and for insight into how parents responded to access to knowledge on curriculum and instructional reforms. The constructivist approach used in the project model allowed parents to discover for themselves much of what is reported in the research literature on the need for a multilevel approach to parent involvement (for example Epstein, 1995; Moles, 1993). Parents often used anecdotal stories of their experiences with schooling to make a point or raise issues during discussions. Parents used these experiences as evidence for the outcomes of schooling of which they were trying to make sense. We also learned that additional strategies are needed to help parents, facilitators, and presenters support and continue dialogue on difficult issues such as institutional racism, tracking and disparate achievement outcomes among students. Exposure to workshops modeling "good" teaching and learning confirmed parents' feelings about the quality of education their children were or were not receiving. They considered seriously the issues of professional development and accountability.

By the end of the projects, parents developed a strong belief that all parents should know what is needed for college entrance and that every parent should have access to that information early in their children's schooling. We also found that parents were unsure how to implement their action plans and how to use what they had learned in a leadership role at their local school. Because of this we agreed to extend the collaboration another year to develop an advanced project for parents from the two previous projects. In this current year of collaboration, the Davis/Wagner cluster and the university facilitated the Advanced Curriculum Leadership Project and studied parents' continued development. The primary questions guiding our collaborative research have been: How are parents' new or re-defined leadership roles constructed during the project, and how

do leadership-building activities and new knowledge alter their attitudes and participation at their children's schools?

### Overview of the Advanced Curriculum Leadership Project

Building on parents' learning from the previous projects, the goals for the advanced project included parents gaining more knowledge about the structure of schools and the nature of change, further defining their leadership roles as representatives of other parents, acquiring the necessary skills to participate in a variety of leadership roles such as sitting on school governance committees, guiding parent discussion groups, planning and facilitating workshops and seminars, and serving as liaisons in their communities to encourage parents traditionally disconnected from schools to become involved. The Advanced Curriculum Leadership Project also offered parents an opportunity for personal inquiry into local school issues and invited them to explore ideas where the cluster could facilitate the implementation of the concept we called "parents as policy partners".

Nineteen parents from the first two projects applied for the Advanced Curriculum Leadership Project; six African American, three Latinas, two Korean, and eight White. The Davis Parent Curriculum Project had recently ended and those parents' enthusiasm for another project carried over so that fourteen of the parents were from the Davis complex. After the first two sessions we lost four parents. Two African American mothers left for medical and work-related reasons. The two Korean mothers were very involved with work in the Korean community and even though we had a Korean translator, they felt they could not devote enough time to the reading and writing components of the project to participate on the level they wanted. Additional parents dropped out of the project near the last weeks for family and work reasons. Our group of twelve parents who participated through the end of the project included six White mothers, three Latina mothers, two African American mothers and an African American custodial grandmother.

The project began with a full-day orientation and planning meeting followed by seven bi-weekly evening seminars, a full Saturday writing workshop session and a final evening meeting. The evening meetings were dispersed over four months to allow parents time to pursue a personal research project. A major part of the advanced project included an I-Search paper in which

parents identified a topic of interest and conducted a mini-research project on the topic.(Macrorie, 1987) *Making the Best of Schools: A Handbook for Parents, Teachers, and Policymakers*, by Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton was our text.(1990) The content of the sessions focused on researching and writing an I-Search paper, increasing objectivity for work with schools, appreciating diversity in the parent community, understanding the complexity of curriculum reform, making presentations, learning interactive methods for leading meetings, and a guest panel on building community leadership. Parents participated in activities that included reading and discussing vignettes of problems a principal might encounter, reviewing updated data from the cluster, role playing Konzal's reader's theatre script on curriculum reform (Konzal, 1996), and an interactive lesson on diversity (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). Throughout the project, time was set aside for parents to work in small writing groups to share ideas and suggestions on their research projects.

### **Research Orientation**

The research interests emerging from the Advanced Curriculum Leadership Project focus on what happens when parents participate in collaborative projects with a social justice agenda; what leadership roles parents will construct for themselves when they are knowledgeable about the content and goals of the curricular and instructional changes taking place in their schools and the complexity of the issues impacting the implementation of those changes; and how the collaborative process contributes to the social construction of new and re-defined roles for parents and what changes occur in the participants attitudes and behavior.

To study these questions we use a qualitative methodological approach that somewhat resembles Fine's and Vanderslice's qualitative activist research (Fine & Vanderslice, 1992) where they were involved in a collaborative research project with teachers and a school district, used data about student performance, read literature which provided alternative educational images, and worked with school community groups as they became 'researchers' to construct a unified, yet complex picture of the many dimensions of their school community and student's lives. Their statement is applicable to our goals for our work with parents as well:

Our desire, simply, is to facilitate, through qualitative activist research, a set of institutional processes that will generate new contexts for change, document processes of change, and create conditions for participants to engage in ongoing reflection on changes. (p. 206)

In addition to the I-Search projects parents were doing, we collected data which allows us to analyze and reflect collaboratively on the processes of change during the project and to evaluate the project and inform the direction of future projects and research. Our methodology uses various qualitative data collection strategies such as notes of informal conversations with parent participants, fieldnotes from participant observation of the group processes and seminars, video and audio-taped sessions, journals and writings produced by parents, and follow-up observations, interviews and survey reports. Our analysis looks at parents as individual participants and as group members, as well as the collaborative group as a whole, particularly looking for insights and understandings which emerge from dialogue and writings.

Parents were asked questions such as: What experiences from their involvement in the first project led them to participate in the leadership project? What does parent leadership mean to them? How are they representative leaders for other parents? Additionally, we wanted to examine what discontinuities may exist between our own understandings of educational reform as educators and those of our parent participants. For example, how do we view the processes of change and the time it takes to implement reforms versus how parents view these same processes? What differences can we see in how we dialogue about the goals of education and changes in teaching and learning and that of the culturally and linguistically diverse parent population with whom we collaborate? Our research in these areas will inform how we can better understand what is needed to help parents have a more profound influence on improving the educational outcomes of all children.

### **Preliminary Findings**

The inequities that result from the way the educational system historically favors certain families over others was a theme that carried over from the previous parent projects. Particularly

because of the impact of analyzing achievement data. During the first projects, the parents had seen a presentation by a Los Angeles area organization, The Achievement Council, which works to raise student achievement in low performing schools. They use national, state and local achievement test data and other indicators to show the disparate educational outcomes and post-secondary opportunities among students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. As parents spoke of what had the greatest impact on their understandings of urban schooling, they all would refer to the data presentations.

Additionally, we provided updated test scores for each of the schools in the complexes as well as the number of students identified gifted at each school by racial group. Parents regularly commented on the affect the data had on their thinking. Many parents felt it was upsetting to see the effects of “institutional racism” resulting from tracking and resource allocation practices. Two black mothers were concerned of the stereotyping affect it had on students and how black students could not see themselves positively within the data presentations. A mother from Europe was less concerned that there was a disparity between Latinos, African American, Whites and Asian students in the California data, but that the scores were so very low for all but the Asian students. Writing about what might work to raise performance in the “shopping mall high school” Powell, Farrar and Cohen suggested, “What must be mobilized is greater consumer awareness: the shock of recognition that institutions which serve the savvy and the powerful well, serve others poorly.” (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985 p. 314) The use of data had that affect and became a powerful tool for moving parents into discussions about equity, race, social class, and sometimes, gender.

As Fine’s and Vanderslice’s research orientation indicated, when people in schools become “researchers”, reflection on change is an ongoing part of the process. (Fine & Vanderslice, 1992) The parents I-Search projects provided that opportunity. But not all parents were able to complete written I-Search reports. Two parents, a mother who is a cardiologist and a father who is an attorney, dropped out of the project in the last weeks because of increased obligations at work. They felt they didn’t have the time to spend on the I-Search project and didn’t want to come to the group without having done something. While we had said that a written product was not the



emphasis but the learning process of personal research into an educational issue of concern to parents was, these parents still felt continuing with the group would be difficult. It was noticeable that the two Korean parents and these two parents, all four from family cultures that promote high-achievement, were the ones who felt uncomfortable continuing with the project if they felt they could not do all the work. At the same time, the other parents with less English proficiency or education, chose to remain in the project and shared whatever they had learned about their topic. Some of their I-Search reports had a short one to two page summary of their project and attached papers they had collected in the form of a scrapbook.

Parents' I-Search projects included topics such as how to provide resources for disadvantaged parents; how to create a special program at the neighborhood school without making the program elitist; the grouping practices in elementary school that lead to tracking in secondary schools; and what can be done about the large number of substitute teachers at a low achieving middle school. The excerpts from some of the parents' I-Search projects reflect how the parents drew upon their own interests to guide their inquiry.

Selena's children attend school at two different elementary schools. She noticed parent involvement was different at each of the schools. As part of her study she interviewed parents and teachers at the schools about parent participation. She compared the two principals at the schools and describes them in her report.

First I observed the leader of Randall. She's hard to find and even if you have an appointment with her, it doesn't guarantee you won't sit in her office for hours. You don't see her interacting with the parents. Actually some people wonder if she even exists. When she holds council meetings it's almost as if she doesn't want to acknowledge the problems of the school or of the parents. The meetings are run without the chairholders and the council members. She says if a meeting is set, they must have them even if the right people aren't there. At Randall there is no PTA, no library for the children, no parent center. It's as if it were day care, drop off your children and pick them up, but don't come, don't call, and don't complain.

Second I observed the leader of Newbridge. I had no trouble finding her. In the morning I could barely keep up with her running around the yard making sure everything is right. I hear her call the children by their names, remind them to keep their jackets on. She

not only acknowledges the parents but even asks them to help with getting kids into class. When she holds council meetings, after the meetings she gives small parent ed. [sic] classes. She tries to help the parents know what it is that their children are learning and hands out materials on whatever the topic. She strongly supports the PTA and parent center. (Selena: Latina, working class mother of four children, married, works part-time at local elementary school)

Parents often comment about teachers' aides and their roles and responsibilities in classrooms.

Karen, now an aide herself, chose this concern as her topic.

Bottom line is that most teachers aides think that they are very essential to the school system and their skills are most useful to the students as well as the teacher. Most teacher aides get into this field because of the enjoyment of children. They like teaching and working with children. They want to go on and get their credentials to become a teacher. Communication is very important. Some teacher aides translate in the classroom for teachers that can't speak the language. Some teacher aides think the teacher should be teaching and speaking the language. So, teacher aides get to work with the children/students until they decide which part of the education field they want to go into. (Karen: African American, three children, single, participating in a 'workfare' program as a teacher's aide at her child's school)

Bilingual education has become a major political issue in California. Sara was interested in knowing more about the program at her child's school. She begins her I-Search report on bilingual education with this personal opening:

Based on the information I was given by my daughter's teachers all through elementary school, I used to believe that she, Paula, (now in fourth grade) was completely fluent in English. However, I was very disappointed to learn that she was still enrolled in ESL. I found out about her English fluency level by accident. At the beginning of the current school year, I went to the school principal's office to talk about my five-year old, Marta, who is in kindergarten. Because the school wanted to assess her proficiency in English. The test showed that Marta was in fact fluent, however I was told that Paula was still in ESL. I asked why because never before any of her teachers had advised me [sic] of her English classroom standing, but the principal did not know either. According to her, this transition from ESL to regular English depends on the teacher's decision as to when the

students are ready for redesignation. I chose my topic of Bilingual Education prior to knowing this sad story. (Sara: Latina, married, working class with two daughters)

Wendy was highly educated in her native country, Iran. English is her fourth language. She was also interested in what happens to ESL students and told the story about her older son not being able to get out of ESL classes and regular classes at his middle school because of his English. Her I-Search project was to contact the large Iranian parent community at her high school and try to increase their knowledge and involvement.

I found out there are two groups of parents: 1. The parents who are very busy, and do not have time!! 2. The parents who can not speak well English [sic], and their children did not have enough information what courses they should take in order to graduate from high school and to enter to colleges and universities. I talked to a few Iranian students who were 9th and 10th grades. They wish that they could take the honor classes, but unfortunately, the teachers do not recommend them, because they do not have “A” in English. I think the teachers should give an opportunity to those students who want to take honors classes. The teachers should also consider other elements in order to recommend the students to honor classes. (Wendy: Iranian immigrant, single, middle class with two sons, works part-time in the school cafeteria)

Each of the parents took the opportunity to observe and or interview other people for their I-Search projects. Many of them discussed their projects with educators who became their “critical friends”. Their reports to the group indicate this was an important part of their learning process. Next we want to report on four themes emerging from our preliminary analysis.

#### Understanding the complexity of schooling issues

As parents found out more about the complex issues of schooling, they began to reflect on how school people were dealing with these problems. The following quotes show parents trying to understand the work of teachers and administrators, much like Sarason’s comment about parents’ need to understand why educators act the way they do. (Sarason, 1995)

Sara: I found out the program is perfect [district’s master plan for bilingual education]. It’s not the program. The problem is the people who are implementing it. The people doesn’t[sic] control the program or the quality. They have to follow the students, that like

in three months, in a very short time, they're seeing the progress of the children. But it doesn't work. They don't do that. The coordinator say that they don't have time to do that. It's very hard for the school to do that. The parents don't know anything about this. They don't even know if their children are fluent because they trust the teachers. But now they're not trusting them anymore because the teachers say one thing and then on the papers [report cards] it say another thing. I don't think it's my fault but maybe, it is my fault. But you never, as a parent, go up to the coordinator and say "Can I see the papers? Can I see my daughter's papers?" No. You just trust the teachers when they say "Don't worry. We're going to give her a test to see if she's ready to redesignate" The problem is there's no people to follow the program to see each child's progress. I spoke to the principal and they get some percentage of money but it's not enough money and they have to see what is the most important thing to spend that money on." (Latina, married, working class with two daughters)

Linda: The breadth and depth of knowledge that good teachers and administrators need, that was shocking to me. I mean I knew it was a hard job and that you guys had master's degrees and all that but I really never appreciated the amount of knowledge that you have to do that. There are so many fronts that need work. I'm overwhelmed with where you start and what to do. And I'm not sure that the organizational structure that's in place and the way that we measure a school's success - it's like there's something lacking in order to help us be effective. And that became really clear to me. That there's so many fronts. There's so much to do. I'm really kind of overwhelmed by the whole thing. (White, married, upper-middle class with two children, works as business consultant)

Donna: It's sort of in our nature to criticize, to look at something face value and say well this is what's wrong with this person, this teacher, this situation. And I think having more knowledge, factual knowledge more understanding and listening to other people's experience and observing other schools, I'm more and more aware of, you know, how quick we are to criticize. I think it's so important to step back and observe and to listen and to try to understand from different perspectives. We can see the problems, but it's what are going to do about it? And the answers are not always simple. And they take time and patience to work through them. And even though we feel frantic and like this is my child's life, and they're going to breeze through school and I don't have the time. But we have to take the time, make the time, because it just won't happen overnight. (White, married, middle class with two children, artist and arts educator)

### Rethinking what is “best” in schools

Parents, and educated middle class parents in particular, have learned from their own experiences the importance of rigorous and challenging school work to their children’s future academic careers. We began to see some rethinking about the competitive nature of curricular decisions.

Kim: Sometimes after these meetings, I would leave here thinking I better start saving money for private school because this just isn’t working. And I’ve really gotten to see LA, the good and the bad, and clearly the good is outweighing the bad all the time. And sometimes I get, in my school and in my family, we get so caught up on the academics and to have someone like Donna saying arts are so important. And you know, enough of this other, math and science, and let’s remind ourselves how important this is. It’s so interesting in a city like this, that has so much art and culture to offer, that we can still continue to almost overlook that. (White, middle class, married with three children)

Francie: Well after I found out that a child could go through high school and achieve practically nothing I wanted to be sure that would not happen to my children. So my concern was that my children were in the right classes, how to put them there and be sure they were there. But I think when you put your children in public schools it’s not enough that your children are performing right but you want all children to perform at the highest level. Because I think the better all the school is, the better your children are going to achieve. And that book I read, *Making the Best of Schools* (Oakes & Lipton, 1990), there was a chapter and I thought about it. That sometimes when you’re trying to do the best for your own child don’t think you’re too at risk [of offending someone] because it might end up you’re doing the best for all children. (White, upper-middle class, divorced with two sons, works in sales)

Francie tells the story of how her son’s high school honors English class was over-crowded. She went to the counselor and asked if they could add a class to reduce the number of students in the class. When told they didn’t have enough “honors” students to make two classes, she suggested they bring in students who may not be “honors” but could benefit from the class. The school added another class and used her suggestion.

Francie: And it ended up that my kid remained in the class that I didn't like and the other kid went into the better class. Well not the better class, but with the teacher I thought was really a wonderful teacher. So they got the advantage of my intervening however, on the other hand my child ended up in a class with less children. So they all got the best.

### Appreciating diversity and working for equity in the school community

The parent projects, from their inception, have always included social justice education goals. The first projects increased parents awareness to issues of diversity and equity. In the advanced project, we wanted to facilitate dialogue that would probe deeper into issues of racial and social class privilege. Griffin notes these dialogues involve trial and error and ongoing experimentation (in Adams, et al., 1997 p. 279). The honesty and trust that developed among the parents was important for opening up discussion on difficult issues. Xandra was often articulate about the discrimination disadvantaged families encounter. During a discussion on discrimination in schools she said:

Xandra: It's been built up over the years and certain things are in place already. And I'm just wondering, how every child is gonna come out successful? I want my baby to be as successful as your baby. I don't want her to miss nothin! And we got to figure out how we can do that. That is the core of this project. How am I going to come out of this with all children being high achievers? (African American, single with three children, on welfare and attending community college)

Speaking passionately about what she has learned during the project, Laurie often seemed to be saying what the other white parents may not have been able to say:

Laurie: I left the first project with a sense of relief because I thought, phew, my child is going to be fine in this system. I'm going to have no problem because I know how to work the system and the parents like me know how to work the system. But I got really concerned about this increasing Hispanic population to where it hurts me in my stomach. Because this city is growing in leaps and bounds with the Hispanic population. And that's what we have to be concerned about because these people are not getting the education. Because they don't know how to work the system. And they assume, they have an innocence about the system, that it is going to take care of them and the system is not going to going to take care of them. (White, married, upper-middle class with two Pre-K children, works part-time)

In the final session, Laurie was able to openly talk about her experience with the group in the context of what she has learned about race and class advantage.

Laurie: I hesitate to be too honest, but you know, I think I just can't help myself. When I started this group, all I was concerned about was PTA and how can I bring - and this is like as honest as I can be without offending anyone - how can I bring white people to my school. Isn't that terrible? OK, I said it. But this has been a profound experience for me and I think probably the most profound was the night we did the exercise of the crossing, passing out the questions (see 'Cross the Room' in Adams, et al., 1997). Because that night all roles were crossed. Everyone, you found yourself in groups that you never thought you'd be in. Like I never thought I'd be in your group [pointing]. And like I thought, 'Oh, I'm so happy she skipped school too.' And it was really a profound experience for me and made me give great thought to what my mission was. And just sitting with you, and I'm listening to you talk about ESL, and I'm realizing that I'm not, I'm not a racist. I'm just ignorant. I need to be taught. And when I hear you talking about the ESL I just get outraged, just outraged that this is going on. Because the people that are in my, you know socio-economic class don't care, because all we care about is our own kids. And we really don't think about it. And in my school, I really hope that is going to be part of implementing my program, to try to look at all the different groups and make sure that everybody's getting it and not just, you know, the elite. [sighs around the room]

### Potential for new leadership roles

Researchers of leadership roles in education comment that leaders should recognize "problems are our friends" (Fullan, 1993) There is an assumption in that statement that people can be objective because the problem is not affecting their own family. In our efforts to encourage parents to consider the educational needs of all students, we found that objectivity was not necessarily automatic once they were provided with data relative to a problem. It was still necessary to discuss with parents, without discounting their personal passions, the importance of separating those passions from policy decisions. The parents needed time to reflect and hopefully, see that when policy decisions are equitable, they do end up benefitting all students.

Researching issues of concern to the parents usually meant the parents were studying problems; problems at their own children's schools. Becoming a leader in such a context needs

more exploration. But as we listened to the parents talk about themselves as leaders, ironically we heard some of the parents express a reticence about accepting the label of “leader” at the same time they were describing their own leadership skills and goals.

Francie: The more you go, the more deeply you’re involved, the more you are discovering. So you really have to sit back and watch and think. It’s getting very involved. To make changes you can not start revolutionary everything because that’s not going to work. First you have to see why things are that way, how they happen to be that way, where you are, and instead of working with just the principal and the whole group of teachers, try to work with one teacher at a time. Go to meetings trying to understand the process. Go to the administrators, the leaders and try to understand and to see if there is a way to change things. And little by little try to do it. Not trying to move the whole mountain because I don’t think it’s going to happen. You have to be very careful in how you want to take leadership because sometimes it can fire back. And that can be a problem so you have to learn about tactics and be very diplomatic. Try to do things and try to understand. Sometimes, you have to step back and be a leader where people don’t see you being a leader.

Laurie: Do I feel like a leader? I am not a leader. I have never been a leader. I have always been a really good worker bee. I have always been a really good serf. I have never been a leader and I find myself in the very frustrating position of being a leader because there is a vacuum. No one will take the role. And so there’s a few of us. And I keep trying to shift the responsibility to others and they keep giving it back. So it’s frustrating, like the thing I was talking about [Laurie asked to have the video turned off for part of the discussion]. I was just embarrassed and humiliated at my own ignorance that that would be a problem. And having been so naive about the whole thing. I’m not an educator and I don’t profess to be an educator. So I find myself to be in a really strange role not wanting to offend people but wanting to make a change. And nobody else is doing it, but somebody has to do it. So it’s frustrating but it’s also exciting to know you can make differences and you can institute change. I just wish someone else would do it.

Donna: I sort of tend to be a worker and if I see a need I will try to do whatever I can, if I think I can do it. I think in the process I’ve volunteered to do a lot of things as a result. So people started going to me for information and looking up to me and it wasn’t really a role that I tried to pursue. But it just sort of happened along the way. So in that way I feel I see people looking to me as a leader and so I start saying well I must be a leader.



Carr wrote of the importance of confidence in minority parents' participation in key areas of school decision making (Carr, 1996). This was an issue for our parents as well, but providing knowledge to these parents had an empowering affect.

Sara: I am not a leader type of a person. I can tell somebody who has the skills to do this, but to do it by myself, no. Maybe I'm not ready but maybe I not feel confident in what I'm doing.[sic] But I'm looking for somebody who can do it. At my school I know a lady who maybe can do it. She has the spirit and the people, they follow her so easy. So maybe with all my knowledge I can help her to do it. When I ask the parents and what do you think about this at the school? They just look at you as a leader [because] you know a lot. Why? So you see, I'm not a leader. I'm just a parent and I want to know more. So I'm going to show you how to get involved so you can learn more.

Xandra: Some parents say what they want to do but they never really show what they can do. I'm a show me kind of mother. I will show you what I can do and I stick it out. I don't short cut. I stick it out from the beginning to the end. And that's where some people don't have the guts. It takes a lot of 'gutso' to hang in there. And I think leadership is having a lot of confidence. And I know that sometimes you're gonna step on some toes and everything and you kinda have to get back and reflect. But that doesn't mean you have to back down.

Nancy - I'd like to see a better relationship among the Hispanic and black parents. And among the Hispanics and the teachers. There is a strong negativism there. But I'm not a leader. I'm a background person and I like to push the leader. And one of the things I would like to do is to be a liaison between the Hispanics and the school and principal. So if they could learn about the system and understand, [then] they could have a voice in the educational system. (Black, married, middle class grandmother, raising two grandchildren)

### **Significance**

As this school district reorganized its operational structure to better implement systemic reforms it became readily apparent that due to inherent weaknesses in our structure for decision-making, the vision for better collaboration at local school sites was seriously at risk. Specifically, the notion of parents, all parents participating as equal partners could never get off the ground if

parents continued to be deprived, or put more kindly, shielded from the kinds of information that forms the basis for sound school policy decisions - - hence our parent education projects.

With their increased training, parents became better informed and appreciated the need to plan for longitudinal quality schooling. Their questions grew more sophisticated and their analyses and critiques of the status quo more pointed.

As issues attendant to equity and access to quality college-bound curriculum and instruction became more of a focus, as a District administrator, Stu became more uncomfortable. It was apparent to him that the type of parent involvement to which the parents in the project were being exposed was totally different from the types of involvement even the most progressive public schools had in place. It was clear that this type of parent participation could and would be very threatening to the system; school site administrators in particular. In all fairness, he feels privileged to work with some excellent and enlightened school principals who he believes could work with parents who were better prepared to question policies and work with school officials to make changes where necessary. But it was also very apparent that these principals were rather extraordinary and the skills and attitudes which they possess would have to be taught to their cohorts. In short, any plan for developing more sophisticated parent partners will have to include training for principals and teachers. Clearly, this training will have to be specially designed to meet the special demands of attitude change and skills in communication, negotiation and accommodation.

Some recent research on parents and their roles in their children's schooling has suggested that active parents may become local elites reinforcing racial and social class privilege. (Wells, Kratzer, & Bernal, 1995) For Lois, this has been troubling. Her own experiences as an active public school parent for many years sees some truth to this claim, but also because of her own experiences, she knows that parent education to prevent this from happening just was not available. Knowledge about curriculum and instruction that meets the needs of all students, knowledge grounded in social justice goals, can provide public school parents with alternative involvement strategies and goals. The parent projects we developed have attempted to do that.

Through our research we have tried to better understand what parents need so they can have a more profound influence on improving education. It also helped define how our university/school community collaboration can empower parents to become involved in more meaningful ways to ensure equitable outcomes for all children. Our school community/university collaboration believes that if we are to address the critical issues of urban schooling, we need to build parent leadership. These new roles need to be legitimized by the university and the local school communities by accepting parents as an integral part of all decisions affecting their children. We believe the Advanced Curriculum Leadership Project provided a rich source of data for a collaborative and exploratory research project which informs future work with parents and communities involved in comprehensive and long-term school reform. The information gathered from the project provides an evaluation of the professional development project as a useful model for parent education which addresses both curriculum reform and the complex issues of social justice. It allows us the opportunity to understand how such a model can encourage ongoing critical reflection as parents pursue collaborative research and action in curricular and instructional reform in their local school communities.

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<sup>ii</sup> LEARN is an acronym for Los Angeles Education Alliance for Restructuring Now and is a major, city-wide reform effort supported by the district, teachers' union, and business and community leaders in the Los Angeles area.

<sup>iii</sup> Each "complex" is comprised of one senior high school and the middle schools and elementary schools which matriculate through the grade levels to the high school. A "cluster" is a group of no more than three such complexes. Hence, the Davis High School complex and the Wagner High School complex comprise the Davis/Wagner cluster. Davis and Wagner are pseudonyms.



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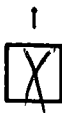
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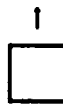
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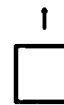
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