Identifying Characteristics in Low SES and Bicultural Parent Groups That Enhance Their

Capacity to Enact Successful Change

Karen L. Rosenquist

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Abstract

The relationship between bicultural parents, low socio-economic parents and the public school system is made tenuous in part by cultural disparities between school officials and parents. The greater the disparity, the more likely parent groups are to be silenced and the more likely they are to refrain from the role of change agents or advocates for school reform. To contemplate what characteristics disadvantaged parent groups should possess to enact desired changes at the school or district level, this study culls from research in several areas of academic literature: parent involvement and student achievement, community organizing, and change management. Each of these areas of research offers insights on how success change is enacted; the characteristics and the attributes groups must have in order to bring about desired changes to processes and outcomes.

Parent leaders and principals from low socio-economic status considered to be change agents in their community were interviewed. Their insights reinforce the literature, comment on the nature of the relationship between parents and school, and articulate the difficulty of making change. Open-ended questions relating to the nature of changes undertaken, the efficacy of tactics employed, and perceived deficit thinking on the part of parents and school personnel are addressed. Results indicated that self-efficacy and competence in the English language are key characteristics of parent groups with high levels of engagement.

Chapter 1 Introduction

To walk or run with that same wind at your back is to float, to sail effortlessly, expending virtually no energy. You do not feel the wind; it feels you. You do not feel how it pushes you along; you feel only the effortlessness of your movements. You feel like you could go on forever. It is only when you turn around and face that wind that you realize its strength.

Being white, or male, or heterosexual in this culture is like running with the wind at your back. It feels like just plain running, and we rarely if ever get a chance to see how we are sustained, supported, and even propelled by that wind.

It is time to make that wind visible (Kimmel, 2002, p.1).

In over the last one hundred years since parent groups first originated, parent engagement in the United States has towed a narrow definition. Recognizing that parents have a role to play in the promotion of higher student achievement, public school districts write policy defining the role that parents may play. By and large school policy usually affirms parents in a *supportive* role - - as follower. Parents are asked to give of their time to do what is prescribed in support of school policies and teacher requests (Auerbach 2012a, Olivos 2006). What happens if parents want to do more than the proscribed role and want to initiate change that requires buy-in from school administration? The answer seems to be different depending on the economic status of the parent community involved. The educational research reviewed herein affirms the viewpoint that when parent communities and school staff are culturally and economically similar, parents that step outside the follower role and into an advocate role are met with low resistance—their desired change is more likely to happen. Conversely, research confirms that when the parent or

the parent group is bicultural or of low SES and dissimilar from the administration, they are met with high resistance when they step out of a subordinate role (Olivos 2006). What explains this difference? Experts in the field of sociology, cultural studies, and education contend that the institution of public schools, like most institutions in our country accommodate our dominant culture (Olivos 2006). Parent groups comprised of well educated people of European dissent that resemble the school staff run alongside the school staff with the same proverbial wind blowing against their backs. That wind blows in the opposite direction for bicultural parent groups. They experience difficulty initiating change they desire not solely because they lack the economic resources of their high SES counterparts but because of their own and the administration's deficit thinking on two fronts: first, their perceived inability to contribute *as partners* in their children's education and, 2) about what they believe it takes to enact change. Rather than being accommodated or brought into discussion and decision-making, they are more likely to experience resistance. The toll of that resistance is that they are silenced and the potential for a partnership with the school is stifled (Auerbach 2012a, Olivos 2006).

The silencing happens by the public education institution not as an overt snub to the democratic principles that promote public education in service of all, but by decades of social norming, poverty, and inequity of educational access. Regardless of its roots, the silencing decreases the common good and undermines the democratic principle of public schools (Auerbach 2012a). By engaging in an examination of what characteristics are positively associated with successful change (defined as one that benefits students, the community and the school), an argument can be made for the definition of parents to expand to include 'partner' or 'collaborator' and silenced groups to use their voice.

A film released in (2012) titled, "Won't Back Down" is based on the true story of Doreen Diaz, a parent of a child who recently graduated Desert Trails Elementary in Adelanto, CA. "Desert Trails, where 100 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, ranks in the bottom third of California schools with similar demographics and has been stuck on the federal watch list for failing schools for six years. Sixty-two percent of students are Hispanic and 27 percent are black. One-quarter of students do not speak English at home, and 15 percent of students tested in 2011 had disabilities" (Lindstrom, 2012, para 4). The film chronicles Diaz's efforts to make changes to the school by invoking the Parent Empowerment Act of 2012, known as the "parent trigger law." The film is a response, albeit a theatrical one, to the same question posed in this research - - what does it take to make changes to improve your child's school when you don't have a college degree, aren't apart of the system, and have no economic status to buy into a better community? In Won't Back Down change was a result of two major assets. The first is moral purpose. The main character, Doreen, found in herself and inspired in others a commitment to a moral purpose that kept them working for change. The second quality was leadership. Doreen found it in herself, despite any formal training and could identify and cultivate it in her parent peers and teacher allies. With these two characteristics she increased the capacity for parent led change in her child's school.

Educational consultant and author Fullan (2005) describes system transformation as a change that requires capacity. He writes "capacity building involves developing the collective ability–dispositions, skills, knowledge, motivation, and resources−to act together to bring about positive change (p. 4). Acting together requires daily collaboration. The ability to collaborate is often more easily afforded to communities in which one or more child guardians can financially afford to be in daily interaction with the school and local community. However, there are other

qualities that influence capacity, those most likely possessed by the parent community in

Adelanto, CA. Most likely they include disposition for tolerating change, local knowledge and

most definitely motivation. Exerting these strengths will as Kimmel says 'make the wind visible.'

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify key attributes for successful change that are unrelated to

ones social, education or economic status. By identifying these characteristics it is hoped that

low SES and bicultural communities can recognize the presence of these attributes in themselves

and in their communities. With this knowledge they can claim a voice in school decision-

making and be agents for change.

Research Question

Perhaps bicultural and low SES parent groups may have more capacity to be successful in

achieving change than either they or school administrators believe. What attributes when present

in parent communities maximize their capacity for successful change?

Theoretical Rationale

The underpinnings of a contemplation on parent capacity for change tether naturally to two

theoretical rationales. The first is the theory of social capital and the second is systems thinking

by Senge (1990). Social capital theory is defined as those resources inherent in social relations

that facilitate collective action. Social capital resources include trust, norms, and networks of

association representing any group that gathers consistently for a common purpose. A norm of a

culture high in social capital is belief in the equality of citizens, which encourages the formation

of crosscutting groups (Lin, 2001). Trust, norms and networks of association are present in both

high and low SES parent communities. In failing and highly diverse school districts, parents and

school personnel may not have enough social capital between them (Harris, Andrew-Power,

Goodall, 2009, p.20). If there is diminished capital, most likely the capacity for change

decreases. For example, bi-cultural and low socio-economic groups participate in the

educational, technological and social networks in which the school personnel participate to a far

less degree than their high SES counterparts. Parents limited participation in online communities,

educational alumni association and professional affiliations constricts their ability to build

networks with school personnel who regularly participate (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009).

Conversely, high SES parents by a far larger percentage do participate in those networks. Their

participation promotes collective parent/school mobilization to provide support for a problem.

At the group level, Senge's conception of system thinking becomes relevant. System

thinking applied to school communities contends that parents, teachers, administrators, students

and local community members are the constituent parts of a whole. Senge contends that

constituent parts ought to embrace this wholeness, seeing themselves as one organic entity with

interconnected way of thinking. Operating in this paradigm, working in support of each other as

one whole, they become a *learning organization*. A learning organization exhibits five main

features: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning.

Of these features, most germane to this thesis topic is shared vision. The lack or conversely the

presence of a shared vision will either stifle or elevate a parent group's capacity for change

(Senge 1990).

Assumptions

Terms commonly found in professional research on parent engagement and on free market theories of change management are used in this research. "Sustainability," is a term currently en vogue in the private sector whose meaning is easy to over simplify. *Sustainability* does not mean "able to endure." Instead the definition intended in this literature is "the capacity of a system to engage in complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose" (Fullan, 2005, p. ix). Other terms that appear frequently in this research are *community* and *bicultural*. Community is understood to be local residents and businesses, parents, teachers, school staff and administrators. Community involvement is assumed to be a favorable condition and not a limiting factor to change. The same can be said of parent involvement. The term bicultural is used to refer to individuals or groups who "function in two [or more] distinct socio-cultural environments: their primary culture and that of the dominant mainstream culture of the society in which they live" (Olivos, 2006, p. 14). Bicultural individuals or groups are typically in a subordinate role to school authority.

Background and Need

Mediratta, et al. (2009) offer tremendous insights to community members as to how to improve schools by exerting pressures that work at various pressure points within their community and at various layers of the educational structure. Their work starts on a macro level providing observations about the need for community organizing and ends on a micro level providing recommendations for parent groups specifically wanting to understand what boxes they need to check off in order bring forth stronger educational opportunities. To understand the macro level

they offer an explanation of several pernicious cultural narratives at play that permeate the

thinking of our educational institution and perpetuate educational inequities. These narratives or

"frames" of thinking go like this: "young people compete for schooling advantages with their

talents and effort in a context of equal opportunity" and "low income children, children of color,

and their families are limited by cultural, situational, and individual deficits that schools cannot

affect" (Mediratta et al., 2009, p.35). By and large, administrators and teachers are well-

intentioned people who genuinely want to help. By and large, their narratives are shaped by the

dominant culture in which they have membership.   Neither in their personal experience or in

their professional training have they honed cultural sensitivity skills. Yet, cultural sensitivity

could be said to be a form of currency in districts with a high percentage of bi-cultural families.

One needs to be aware of their dominant cultural narrative to recognize when these narratives are

impacting decision-making as to what is best for the students. Furthermore, without true cultural

awareness teachers and administrators may unconsciously shed personal responsibility, believing

the reasons for inequities in education are justified.

If the presence of this narrative is to be refuted the local communities must challenge this

narrative. The work of any community organizing is not only about the specific change desired

but also about upending false narratives and replacing them with ones that supports a narrative of

strong democratic principals for all families. On the micro level Mediratta, et. al. elucidate what

they found in the parent groups studied to be successful. They address the benefits of political

capital, the need for organizing and preparing properly to enhance their credibility and

identifying key leaders within the community.

Educational consultant and author, Fullan (2005) writes "a sense of moral purpose is

fueled by a focus on value-added high expectations for all, raising capability, pulling together

and an ongoing hunger for improvement"(p. 59). Moral purpose is the DNA of sustainable change and that DNA must incubate in all the constituent parts of the community: student, parent, teacher, principal and superintendent. For better or worse, Fullan does not delve into comparisons on the efficacy of one group over another (low SES versus high SES, dominant versus bicultural). Fullan is, however, detailed in his articulation of how systemic change is sustained. His work is a partial link uniting research in community organizing for school reform with 'how-to' recommendations promoted by change management experts from the free market. Taken together, the research from Fullan and that of Mediratta, et. al., form a picture of the qualities low SES and bi-cultural parent groups need to possess to amplify the likelihood for successful change. The work of this research is to verify the findings or these experts through interviews with parents presently attempting to bring about change rooted in a vision shared between administrator and parents, not one dictated by one group to the other.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

Parent engagement has been dissected from various vantage points for the last 30 years to ascertain its impacts on student achievement. Research has examined the relationship between student achievement and parent engagement in a) the classroom, b) the home, c) communication with the school and, 4) parent-teacher conference attendance (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris, 1997) Additionally, literature has covered the intersection of these types of engagement with parent socio-economic status, education level, and cultural background (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, Brissie, 1987; Zhang, Hsu, Kwok, Benz & Bowman-Perrott, 2011). A positive association between parent engagement and student achievement has been demonstrated. Public schools do not debate the value of parent engagement; encouraging parent engagement is standard public school and district policy −albeit within limited definitions.

A second vantage point from which we can understand the purpose of parent engagement is in context of fulfilling the democratic principles that influence the service public school system provides to all children.   In service of these principles, inquiry about the nature of parent-school relationship warrants scrutiny. Should parents leave the educational goals to the schools? Should schools consult parents as equals before making curricular, policy or other school related decisions? Should schools request permission of the parent community they serve before they set educational goals? Who are the leaders, who are the followers? Is the ideal relationship a partnership? Why or Why not? (Auerbach 2012a, Olivos 2006). In general, literature focusing on community organizing for school reform examines socially just

relationships between parent and school conclude that "parents as partners is an expression of the democratic principles in public education" (Auerbach, 2012, p. 4). These partnerships serve the common good and promote social justice for all families.

The bodies of literature addressed above have provided vantage points from which to understand the benefits of parent engagement. They have also provided scaffolding for the issue under question in this thesis - - if parent groups desire a change in school policy, curriculum or school related procedures, either in concert with or opposition to the school district, what characteristics for successful change does a parent group need to have? Change is change and regardless of the sector of society in which it originates, the initiating group must have sufficient capacity if they are to be successful. The literature by change management experts reviewed herein examines the set of characteristics required by any group if they are attempting successful change.

Parent Engagement and Student Achievement

Parent engagement has been found to be positively associated with student achievement, encouraging school districts to promote parent engagement policies. Research finds that higher SES parents are more likely to engage with teachers and teachers to have a positive view of that involvement. Conversely, higher SES parents are less likely to support their children with homework help. For lower SES families their involvement is the opposite; they engage less with the school and more with the children at home. In general, educational research has moved beyond contemplating whether parent engagement is useful to schools. The consensus is that by and large it is (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris 1997).

Systems Thinking

A more current development by education thought leaders focuses on "systems thinking," improving student outcomes by changing or implementing systems that promote desired outcomes. System thinkers, like Michael Fullan and Tony Wagner believe that parents play a vital role in leading these types of system changes because they act as change agents to restructuring student and community attitudes, values, and behaviors. Parent commitment or conversely their lack of commitment to the moral purpose behind any proposed system change dramatically increases or decreases how sustainable a change will be.

Intersection of Race and Socioeconomic Status

Neither the work by Fullan or Wagner contemplates the intersection of race and socio-economic status on the system. Olivos (2006), reports that school officials consider bicultural and low SES families subordinate ill-equipped to have a seat at the decision making table. Olivos goes on to convey that the relationship between bicultural parents and schools is tense and reflective of large societal issues, "the relationship between bicultural parents and the school system is in fact a "micro-reflection" of deeper societal contradictions resulting from economic exploitation and racism. These contradictions produce ever-present tensions that eventually develop into conflict. When the contradictions become so apparent that they can no longer be ignored or when subordinate groups uncovers them (from developing a critical or political consciousness) there is conflict" (Olivos, 2006, p. 22). Olivos' (2006) research does not contemplate a solution for how to involve more low-income bicultural parents in the public schools to improve outcomes. He does advocate that the solution must be anchored in both political and social activism.

Community Organizing

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s another track of literature on parent involvement arose. An examination of engaged parenting in this area leans far more toward a definition of activism than one of volunteerism. Parent activists organize for social reform because their schools lack the resources that well-off schools enjoy. Demanding equality, these parents are "drivers of change and creators of "civic capacity" in urban education (Hargraeves & Fullan, & Barber, 2009, p. 145-147). The literature reviewed relies on case studies of low-income neighborhoods that attempted change, specifically on how they developed political capital and how they used it effectively. In some cases, the political capital of low-income parent groups shot up because they were bankrolled by prestigious foundations. With the help of foundation money parent activists received training to develop their leadership skills. The idea behind the financial investment was to bolster parent groups' ability to erect bottom-up change (Mediratta, et. al., 2009). It is questionable if bottom-up parent driven change will prove sustainable. There is not enough data to pool to form a conclusion. It is also unclear whether parent groups' efforts can shape systemic reform or stop short, yielding local site-specific improvements.

Change

Change management is typically employed by free market enterprises seeking to boost their bottom line. Change projects, or 'transformation', according to the Harvard Business Review in an article by Sirkin, Keenan and Jackson (2005) is made up of hard and soft factors (p. 110). Both factors must be assessed to understand if change or transformation is to be successful. Hard factors include: 1) project duration, 2) capabilities of project teams, 3) commitment by all

staff, even those at a senior level and, 4) additional effort by employees to cope with the change

(Sirkin, et al., 2005, p. 110). By applying a numerical value to the four key factors of any

change: duration, integrity, commitment and effort, a change project can be evaluated for the

likelihood for success. Similarly, the idea that successful change can be predicted is echoed in

Duck (2001). She writes that three essential elements are specified as requisites for successful

change in either the sector: "1) sound strategy, 2) good management and, 3) heightened

sensitivity to the emotional and behavioral issues inherent during change, and a willingness to

address them" (p.11). None of the literature reviewed extended beyond for profit into the realm

of community organizing or parent engagement literature. It is unclear if parent groups have

used evaluation tools to gauge the likelihood of a successful outcome.

Chapter 3 Method

Introduction

The data accumulated to inform this study comes from literature sources that reside in the one of three domains. The first domain is parent empowerment. The second domain encompasses articles and books written by educational thought leaders citing best practices as a result of surveying educational, community and business leaders. The final domain is free market change management expert literature.

In addition to literature reviews, qualitative research was garnered from expert interviews with parent leaders from low and middle socio-economic districts. A third interview was conducted with a principal of an elementary designated "at risk" by No Child Left Behind criteria.

Sample and Site

Experts from two cities in California were interviewed. Both cities are home to diverse communities and low to high socio-economic neighborhoods.

Participants include:

Martine K. – Formerly Parent Engagement Leader for a privately managed charter school. Mother of seven children. Current board member in a California school district that is serves diverse low to middle income families.

Kathryne N. – Parent Ambassador for a privately managed charter school. Mother of one. She emigrated from Vietnam.

Melissa L. –Elementary school principal in a small rural city in California. Mother of two.

Melissa is Caucasian. She is bi-lingual in English and Spanish. Her elementary school is

comprised of 98% Hispanic students and 98% on free and reduced lunch.

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects in research as

articulated by the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally, the research

proposal was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for

the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number 10071.

Access and Permission

These people were contacted via phone or email. Some are personal contacts and some were

cold called. They were phoned or emailed with a description of the project and asked if they

were interested in participating in this study. Their comments are confidential and respondents

were able to refuse to answer any question and to terminate the interview.

Data Gathering Strategies

The strategy for gathering data entailed interviewing parent leaders from a community that has

reversed its standing as a failing district to one that in recent years has had a dramatic increase in

test scores. Currently their API exceeds 800 in 14 out of 20 schools.   The interviews were

designed to understand the parent, school and community characteristics in their particular

community that support or impede sustainable change. Additionally, an interview was

conducted with a Caucasian principal of a school that has a large population of families that are

non English speaking.   This interview was to provide counterpoint to the parent interviews.

Appointments were set up of approximately one hour each. Questions asked were derived from

the findings and recommendations from the literature review.

Explain how you arrived at this role?

Please describe how you collaborate with schoolteachers and administrators to make changes or

improve the quality of student learning?

What advice can you give parents who want the school or district to make a change?

In your community, what groups hold the power to make change?

What intrinsic skills/assets for successful change are common in the parent community(s) with

which you work?

What, if anything, limits parents ability to bring about change at the school, district, or

community?

What research on parent engagement would you like to conduct if you could?

How could your parent community benefit from learning change management strategies?

Data Analysis Strategies

The analysis of this research focuses on how the findings captured in interviews compare to

those in the literature review. This research examines the relevance of literature, somewhat

outdated, to what is current in American public schools.   Are previous findings current, obsolete

or ought they be revised given the interviews and survey responses?

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

Three interviews were conducted; two with elementary school parents and one with an elementary school principal. These three participants represent two different California school districts. The districts are similar. Each is largely comprised of low to middle SES families, each serves a student population that is over fifty percent ELL students, each serves parents a large percentage of parents with little or some college education.

1) Parent Interviews: The first interview was conducted by telephone with Martine K. the second in person with Krystine D. Follow up research to learn about the school district in which they live was conducted online. Their district is situated amidst high tech businesses. In this area, there is considerable awareness by free-market companies that the educational needs of the surrounding community are not being met. Foundation money and entrepreneurs provide supplemental funds for educational counseling and the acquisition of technology.

Martine K. - The discussion with Martine was conducted by telephone. During our extensive telephone conversation, Martine discussed several topics openly and with authority. Martine is the mother of seven, she is an American citizen of Hispanic decent. She does not hold a college degree. She is bilingual, fluent in both English and Spanish. She is a self-described activist for children. Her own children have attended public, charter, and parochial schools. Currently her children attend a charter school run by a management company. She was employed as a parent activist for this company until she resigned in 2013 to devote her time to her new position as

school board member in her children's district.   In the run for this position, she unseated the incumbent. Her nomination was endorsed by the local newspaper.

Parent Understanding

Martine's first point is that parents need to understand that their voice matters.   They are not educated in the politics of education enough and they are doing themselves a disservice. By becoming more knowledgeable they can claim the power to make local changes and they can build viable coalitions in their district.   In order to accurately understand what to change and how they can make change, parent education of the politics at both the local and state level is imperative. She feels that parents should be aware of the power of the teacher's union.

How Schools Define Parents Role

 In her opinion, the role of the parent is conceived differently in each type of school. In public schools, the principal holds the authority and asks parents to support the principal's goals. In private parochial schools the role of the parent is to reinforce biblical teachings in the home. Parents are also expected to work in support of school goals in the form of committees. Lastly, in charter schools, parents are engaged prior to policy decisions being formed but their input is in the form of advice. Parents are not considered decision makers.

Parent Efficacy

As previously stated, Martine vigorously asserts that parents need to claim power in order to provide their children with educational opportunity. She believes that parent education will

create a more powerful parent community. She also believes that parents must possess a

willingness to be all in - - to commit to 'yes.' Through their commitment they can form viable

coalitions that can push for change.   These coalitions need to happen at the local level.

Impact of Differing Educational and Cultural Backgrounds Between Teachers and Parents

Martine has observed that teachers don't have a lot of empathy for parents. She believes teacher

perceptions of parents are derived from what they see in the media. She commented that charter

schools send teachers on home visits so that teachers can learn more about the students and their

families. Unfortunately, school unions prevent public school teachers from doing the same.

Krystine D. – Krystine answered every question willingly.   We met in a coffee shop that she

frequents to do her business. She had a laptop and a cell phone in her possession suggesting a

facility with technology. Krystine's primary education was completed in Vietnam. In the last

two years, Krystine has completed all her coarse work for a teaching credential, including an

assistant teaching rotation in elementary school. Her only child is in a local charter school run

by a charter school management company. She is a staunch supporter of the charter school

company. As Parent Ambassador she regularly interacts with all seven of the charter schools run

by this company and thus she has an understanding of the parent community at each school site.

Through her in-class observations and her interaction with charter school personnel, Krystine

feels that teachers and administrators at the charter school (which is not unionized) welcome

parents rather than rush them out the door. She believes the opposite is true at traditional public

schools.

Parent Efficacy

Krystine reports that the parents that elect to send their children to charter school have a solid sense of efficacy. Unless they are non-English speaking or have a strong cultural belief that all matters relating to the children's education are to be left to the school, parents express their opinions and believe they can make a difference in their children's education. She measures their involvement by the number of volunteer hours that parents commit.   Parents are required to volunteer 30 hours per child per year. The majority of parents volunteer many more hours than this.

Parent Led Change

Parent's opinion and suggestions are encouraged and welcomed by school personnel. Krystine cited ways in which parents have made suggestions upon which the school has acted. For example, a recent practice was started that the monthly community meetings are translated into Spanish so that more parents can participate. A second example offered involved school facilities. The parents wanted a new outdoor covering for the lunch area for cold weather. They joined with the charter management company and school administrator to get the needed funds. She gave no examples of parents leading change or working in equal partnership with the school.

Strengths and Deficits in Parent Community

 Krystine states that the parent community has several strengths and some deficits. The charter school parents must commit to the volunteer work. Most parents complete well above the 30 volunteer hours per year/per student required by the school. They attend school meetings

including weekly coffee with the principal, Back to School night, parent-teacher conferences and community meetings. Most are proficient with email and texting and use it to stay connected to the community.   However, she feels they would benefit by understanding more about social networking.

Lacking in the community is cross cultural awareness and sensitivity between different cultural groups. She specifically mentioned the Vietnamese and the Mexican populations.   She stated that the lack of cultural awareness limits their ability to come together as a community. Low paying jobs that require parents to work multiple jobs also erodes the parent community. Parents who have to work several jobs have no time to stay in regular communication with the parent community or the school, to volunteer or to help their children with homework. She also mentioned that families who don't understand English very well do not have high participation rates.

2) Melissa L. – In a district that also abuts Silicon Valley, Melissa's elementary school has a very similar population to the regular (non-charter) public school in Karen and Krystine's district. Melissa has been in the district for over six years and been in her current position for two years. She is Caucasian and is fluent in both English and Spanish.   She is a mother of two college aged children both educated in the district in which she works. We met in person for over an hour. She was open to all questions.

Role of Parent

Melissa feels parents are essential to the success of their school.   She engages them in formal modes that most principals do: school site council, ELL functions, PTA, volunteer roles, and classroom help.

Parent Education

Melissa firmly believes that parent education is a valuable investment of time and money.   She

holds a monthly coffee meeting after drop-off to help keep parents informed on school business.

To encourage attendance at school site council meetings, she offers food and babysitting. Finally,

she has used funds to hire a Parent Liaison for 10 hours a week. This liaison is a bi-lingual

(English/Spanish) mother of five. She is responsible for being a bridge between home and

school, to identify unmet needs of students and families and to provide parent education.

Parents as Partners

Melissa feels that parents are not partners in curriculum. She does feel parents and schools are a

team that need to work in unison to educate children. For example, she says that as a designated

"failing school" by NCLB, parents are entitled to choose supplemental services for their children.

Those decisions are often reached by a collaboration between school and family.   On a different

track, Melissa states that she believes that she works for the students and the families.

Parents Ability to Drive Change

In Melissa's opinion, parents are limited to drive or even to request or to suggest changes in

school curriculum, policy or practices because they don't know what they want. The reason for

this is that many of them are not themselves educated.   CDE stats show their education level is

1.6, indicating low education attainment.   If they don't know what's possible they can't ask for

it. Melissa also notes that if a parent is not a strong English speaker they are less likely to speak

up to request changes that they would like. Even if parents want a good education for their

children, which most do, they may not feel that they are equipped to advocate for it. The Parent

Liaison helps to surface their requests for change.

Deficit Thinking by School Staff

Melissa acknowledges that teachers and she are influenced by what they have experienced in

their own pursuit of education. These experiences can unconsciously bias educators about what

families should and should not be doing at home. When working with families that have different

cultural values and behaviors it can be hard to be non-judgmental and judgments influence how

we interact with others.

Overall Themes

Unions are a Limiting Factor

Union contracts protect poor practice and teachers. Change in classroom cannot begin because

teachers who are protected by tenure cannot be removed. Contractual terms prevent interested

teachers from using non-classroom time to get to know students and their families outside the

classroom.

Self-Efficacy

The more parents feel like they have cultural capital, the more likely they are to engage with the

school at a basic level.   Comfort with the language, facility with electronic communication and

prior lived experiences, when possessed by parents, increase the likelihood that they will push

for change. Change cannot begin if all parents within a community lack self-efficacy. It only

takes a few who possess a high degree of self-efficacy to bring others along. These few shoulder

the responsibility for motivating others to take action.

Supportive Role Versus Partnership

Parents seem to want to be in support of the school's goals. They do not seem to need to be

decision makers but do want to be asked their opinion. This is true when they feel school

administrators are doing a good job, meaning the child is happy, academically succeeding and

school test scores are strong.

Parent Engagement As A Cultural Value

Interviewees suggest that the role of parent as partner or parent as a change agent is defined by

cultural norms and roles. They reported that in many other cultures parents do not challenge the

school because the school is the almighty authority that sets the rules to which student and

families adhere.   Furthermore, they report that often parents raised in Asia or Mexico do not feel

it is their place to engage with school.   These beliefs carry over to their lives in the States and

inform their interactions, or lack thereof, with the school.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

The research validated findings and the opinions found in the literature reviewed, specifically substantiating the observations and analysis in literature by thought leaders in the areas of social justice for bi-cultural communities and community organizers. The interviews, originally intended to examine examples of parent-led change of which the interviewees had first hand knowledge, were instead focused on the characteristics that could support or curtail change that the interviewees observed in their community. The interviewees could not provide substantial examples of parent-led change, they could however provide numerous examples of changes proposed by parents and approved by school principals. The lack of examples suggests a possible reason that very little literature on parent led change exists. Parent led change is the exception, not the rule in public schools leaving a dearth of sources to research. More commonly the practice of implementing changes is initiated by public school administrators.

The typical arrangement described by interviewees confirms that administrators are leaders and the parents are followers. This structure of leader/follower may be beneficial to low socio-economic communities when student outcomes are optimal; students are engaged in learning, learning occurs in a safe environment, students acquire socially acceptable behavior and perform to standards acceptable to the parents and to society at large. Krystine seemed very content with the student outcomes of her child and was comfortable with the leader/follower relationship because she was pleased with her child's performance. Conversely, Martine was not

pleased with the outcomes her older children obtained in their education.   Disappointed, she felt

that parents needed more say. She chose to engage in local politics and to promote the need for

parent education on educational issues so that they can be stronger advocate and better partners

for change.

The characteristics that positively affect their parent efficacy for change are several. This

research indicates that, 1) a strong moral purpose, 2) English fluency and, 3) a high degree of

self-efficacy are requisite characteristics. These three primary drivers seem to influence other

characteristics also positively associated with successful change. High socio-economic parent

communities may possess these characteristics. Indeed, they are often bi-products of wealth,

educational opportunity and a shared cultural background with school personnel. However,

these characteristics are not the exclusive domain of economic status. Said differently, economic

status alone does not limit moral purpose, English fluency, or feelings of self-efficacy.

In the interviews conducted herein, the parents stated they felt a high degree of

commitment to ensuring access for their children to a strong public education. That moral

purpose in turn motivated them to "advocate for students" and to commit their time and energy.

Krystine shows her commitment by working as a Parent Ambassador for the charter organization

running her child's school. She regularly visits all the campuses run by the organization. Her

role is to help recruit new parents to the school and to meet regularly with teachers to express the

concerns of the parent community. Martine previously worked as a Parent Outreach Coordinator

for a charter organization now serves as a school board member. Both mothers stated that they

serve their community because they believe strongly that a solid education is the path to

economic security for their children.   The case might be made that parents whose children are

not receiving the same educational opportunities as others feel a stronger sense of moral purpose.

Taking that line of reasoning a step further, feelings that children are being denied, rather than afforded educational opportunity, may increase the sense of moral purpose and positively impact a parent community's likelihood for successful change. Moral commitment rather than being curbed by their origin of birth, economic status, or their level of English fluency may be enhanced. This notion squares up nicely with the literature of community organizing for change.

All subjects interviewed are bilingual. English is not the primary language for one of them. Each parent and the principal interviewed have committed many hours getting to know the parents in their school community. It is their view that limited language skills cause parents to be reticent about interacting with the schools. Melissa and Krystine reported that when a school official spoke the home language, parents were more communicative. They also verified that inversely parents who speak the dominant language engage with school staff more on every level. These comments mirror the literature findings and support the idea that a parent group's overall lack in language proficiency silences the parents from advocating for change. It also diminishes their sense of self-efficacy.

Interviewees reported that parents with a high degree of self-efficacy are more likely to become involved with the school and to advocate for change. It was observed that the parents interviewed are among this group. Martine holds a very high-degree of self-efficacy. She is neither a high SES parent nor does she hold a college degree; her sense of self-efficacy is tied to her lived experience. Firstly, she is equally conversant in two languages allowing her to comfortably communicate on complex topics in both. Secondly, as a mother of seven, she has made several passes through the public school system. She has ample first hand insight on how schools in her district operate and how to influence decision-making at the school and district level. In speaking with her, what comes across is that she operates very effectively in school

culture. Her bi-cultural status appears to enrich, rather than diminish the contribution she has made as a parent, a parent leader and now as a school board member.

Martine and Melissa both state that parent improvements in self-efficacy can be derived from actions taken by the school, from actions taken by parent leaders, as well as by parents to learn to become parent leaders. This thesis research found that in low SES communities in which there are high concentrations of non-English speakers that did not receive high levels of education in their native country that this group is most likely to be ineffective at pushing for change, let alone interacting with the school for any reason. The lack of action results in a lack of self-efficacy. In the case of Melissa L.'s school, the presence of a liaison to whom parents like the ones described can express their desires has resulted in parents becoming more aware of how the US system works and that parent. The liaison provides a bridge, allowing the parents to fully articulate their desires. Furthermore, the mere fact that the school has a liaison may, alone, signal to the parents that engagement is desired and in turn increase the opportunity for of self-efficacy to increase.

Partnerships--defined as co-decision making responsibility--between school and parents is held out in educational literature as a model relationship. In structure, a partnership is democratic, weighting the opinion of stakeholders equally. Given that parent involvement is believed to increase student outcomes, a partnership that is inclusive of parents is understandably appealing. However, on the ground in every school site examined for this research, partnerships are non-existent. At best, the relationship is a collaboration (also referred to as leader/follower relationship) with the final authority residing exclusively with the principal. A collaboration may be a better relationship but it was incorrectly referred to as a partnership. The principals with genuine interest solicit parent involvement, ask their opinion, and reach out to inform them

on what they are doing. However, they stop short of including parents on the decision-making.

In the charter school setting, parents perceive a greater sense of partnership, yet they are still

contributors and not deciders. This arrangement does not seem unequal to bi-cultural parents

that come from cultures in which school authority is unquestioned and unquestionably given

more weight. If the test scores are good and the child is doing well, parents claim there is no

need to challenge the relationship structure. Charter schools that outperform neighboring public

school seem particularly resistant to parent led change if their scores are the higher of the two.

Charter school parents perceive that the school is on the right track.   These finding as they relate

to this research imply that parents most often ask for change but it is a request that must be

agreed to by the deciding authority, the principal.

The most accurate articulation of the characteristics parent groups need to possess to lead

change is found in literature on community organizing. Community organizing is designed to

serve the needs of the under represented. It offers this constituency tactics and strategies for

their specific limitations. Literature on community organizing, unlike the works of educational

leaders like Fullan and Wagner, have as a starting place for a discussion on change, a bi-cultural

lens and they place cultural and economic limitations at the forefront of a discussion on change.

The purpose here is not to refute Fullan or Wagner who favor systems thinking, but to anchor

this research in the correct lineage of literature.

Most changes come with a cost (professional development facilities improvements, staff

time) and higher SES families can afford to underwrite them with monetary donations.

Obviously, lower income communities, limited in their ability to afford extras, are also limited in

their ability to fund change. This inability might explain why local politics but especially

community organizing may be the only routes for low SES parent communities to take that want

to bring about change. Community organizing is cause based, energizing its members around a moral purpose. Organizers often help participants' maximize their strengths and correct for their weaknesses. The more members participate the greater their feeling of self-efficacy. They also identify community leaders and build alliances expanding support for their cause. Their strength is in numbers, not dollars.

Limitations/Gaps in the Study

The constraint on this study was imposed by access to parent groups organizing to make a change at the time of this literature. This limited first hand observations. An ideal study would contrast two communities, one high SES and one low SES enacting similar changes so that first hand observations could be made. Furthermore, there was not time to interview a large sample of low or middle SES parent communities.

The analysis of this research is neutral on the ideal structure of the relationship between parent and principal. This analysis does deepens existing analysis of the discussion on what holds low SES parents back from advocating for change; why parents may not be the voice of change when voices from the community may be to the benefit of the children.

Implications for Future Research

Building on the current research future research should examine student outcomes in communities where participation in parent training groups is high. Additionally, an examination of the efficacy of parent training groups to improve parents feeling of self-efficacy warrants research.

Overall Significance of the Study

The significance of an examination on the characteristics of change in low SES communities is not to bolster parent involvement because it bolsters student outcomes as much as it is about understanding how people that the educational system is trying to serve become disenfranchised and silenced by our dominant culture. As such, this thesis provides additional research to corroborate previously written literature that illustrates how inequity and social injustice creep into our social institution despite the admirable intension of people working in them and of those outside of it working for change. The ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the participants in our educational system are changing, becoming ever more diverse. Until the school leaders and teachers reflect the same level of diversity found in the general population research must continue that contemplates the experiences of bi-cultural and low socio-economic parent communities.

Of secondary importance, this study tangentially critiques change management concepts put forth by free market thinkers. In recent years, especially in California, foundations, charter school management companies and consulting firms have come to the rescue of failing school districts. Their solutions to structural problems within these districts are devised by the best and brightest business minds plucked from first tier business schools. To those who pursue those practices, this study provides input on the extent of drag brought by cultural, economic and language disparity between school personnel and the families they serve. Change management is about applying an analytic value to change project variables. The findings and analysis of this study contend that change management experts should heavily weight the strengths and

weaknesses within a parent community and the differences between parent and school personnel

community before applying change management strategies to educational settings serving low

SES and bicultural communities.

About the Author

The author is a graduate student in the Department of Education at Dominican University. She

holds an BS in Art History, French and English from University of California at Santa Barbara.

She serves on the board of an educational organization that provides academic mentoring to high

achieving, low income students. She is a mother of two.

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