

Latino Families Challenging Exclusion in a Middle School: A Story from the Trenches

Pablo Jasis

Abstract

This study examines a grassroots, school-centered parent and family organizing effort from the actual “trenches” in the struggle for equity and excellence in education. This is an exploration of the intrinsic value and the complex dynamics of the organizing process of a small group of Latino immigrant parents struggling to improve their children’s educational opportunities at their local middle school. It is based on a microanalysis of the parents’ interactions, exploring the process of awareness and mobilization as the participant families challenged established school policies and practices they perceived as discriminatory towards the education of their children. It chronicles and examines the process by which the participating families and their children increased their visibility in the school community, eventually gaining access to more challenging instruction and to an improved school experience. The author examines the parents’ process of engagement at the school by focusing on specific moments and interactions called trigger events, which play a critical role in the parents’ mobilization. These events galvanize and inspire their increased participation in a process marked by initial feelings of indignation and alienation but which, over time, engages the participants in a journey of joint discovery, collaboration, and hope.

Key Words: parents, participation, Latino schooling, school reform, empowerment theory, social movements, middle schools, tracking, access, family involvement, activism, trigger events, collaboration, families, junior high

Introduction

There is an emerging body of literature dedicated to chronicling and analyzing the role that progressive parent activism can play in school reform, particularly among historically underserved communities (Jasis & Marriott, 2010; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Shirley, 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Worgs, 2011). Many of these recent studies focus on regional and nationwide organizations, programs, and coalitions that over time and through remarkable strategic vision and organizational partnerships were able to gain significant clout on educational, political, and institutional spheres (Henig, 2011; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). There is, however, considerably less investigation into the process of local, grassroots, school-centered parent and family organizing efforts and about the deep motivations, the challenges, and the potential of these smaller scale initiatives to impact the quality of educational services provided to the families' children on a school-by-school basis.

The purpose of this study is to chronicle and examine one of these emerging examples of parent organizing at the local level, from the actual "trenches" in the struggle for equity and excellence in education. This is an exploration of the intrinsic value and the complex dynamics of the organizing efforts of a small group of Latino immigrant parents struggling to equalize their children's educational opportunities at a local middle school. (Note: The term parents will be used throughout this narrative to refer to parents, grandparents, and other caregivers.) At the time of this investigation, these families' children were part of an emerging minority in the school community, often less visible at school functions and generally regarded as a low-achieving student population by many teachers based on their performance of various benchmark assessments. This study analyzes the process by which, over time and through daily and committed organizing efforts, these families and their children increased their visibility in the school community, gained access to more challenging instruction, and generally improved their school experience.

This investigation is intended as a contribution to the literature on grassroots social movements, and it centers its examination on specific events and interactions that took place throughout the parent organizing process at a neighborhood school during a number of community meetings. I examine throughout this paper the importance of specific interactions during the parents' struggle, analyzing their impact on the process of individual and collective awareness. These events, called here *trigger events* (Woliver, 1992), fueled the participants' motivations to become local education activists on behalf of their children and of other families' children. Although there were a number of trigger events and significant interactions throughout the families' engagement

and mobilization at this school community, this study focuses on the process by which a group of Latino families challenged a school's practice of selecting students for its upper-track math instruction, which the parents perceived as unequal and discriminatory towards their children.

Based on the input from the participating parents, teachers, and students, this particular trigger event and its aftermath helped to significantly change the way the school perceived these students and their families, helping them gain visibility and eventually improving access to quality instruction. Conversely, it was also instrumental in enhancing the families' views of the school from a perceived site of relative alienation toward a more hopeful vision of the school as an institution dedicated to their children's academic development with a nurturing outlook.

The math placement issue was chosen for investigation among other trigger events that also impacted the development of the school community's consciousness for specific reasons. First, because it aptly exemplifies, more than others throughout this process, the complexity of the dynamics involved in the participants' engagement, the depth of their commitment to their cause, and their strategic foresight as they struggled to change a perceived system of institutional exclusion. Secondly, because from its inception and through its aftermath this event contained many of the elements of consciousness raising that exemplify effective community action toward social change, such as an exploratory understanding of discriminatory practices, a collective disposition towards challenging institutional exclusion, a joint strategizing with clear goals and objectives, the development of grassroots leadership, and a planned, methodic set of interactions with other stakeholders in the process, such as teachers and administrators (Freire, 1994; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2004–2005).

The study of emerging parent mobilizing initiatives such as the one examined in this paper should help educational leaders understand and support other examples of grassroots organizing in different contexts, where parent and family engagement around schooling can also make a significant difference in the quality of education their children receive. An exploration of inclusive local efforts by low-income families working in solidarity can also help model larger initiatives for school reform, equity in education, and the development of citizenship at the local level.

Parent Activism and Schools

There is a robust body of research that supports the positive academic influence of parent participation in improving academic outcomes (Epstein, 2009; Funkhouser & Gonzalez, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010; Lam,

1997). More recently, research has also been focusing on the need to equalize the schools' approach to diverse parents and families (Auerbach, 2007; Delgado Gaitan, 2004; Jasis & Jasis-Ordoñez, 2004–2005; Lareau, 1994; Stanton-Salazar, 1990; Valdés, 1996). There is, however, comparatively less investigation focusing on the history, the development, and the overall efficacy of parent *activism* in expanding and improving education for diverse children (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2004–2005; Warren, 2011).

Parent activism, defined here as the efforts of caregivers to promote, advocate, mobilize, or direct social, political, environmental, or institutional change in schools, is often examined as an expression of public engagement at the local, grassroots level (Orr & Rogers, 2011; Shirley, 2011). As such, it has deep historical roots dating back to the first experiments of American public schooling (Shirley, 2011). However, with the notable exception of the underground African American schools in the South during the times of slavery and segregation (Smith, 1998), it was only beginning in the 1950s that parent activism and advocacy were recognized as significant factors in the educational landscape and as an expression of expanding social struggles for equality and civil rights (Warren, 2011).

Since then, whether in the form of incipient, highly localized organizing or in the most visible expressions of mobilized communities and grassroots coalitions, parent activism has become a critical tool towards equity in education for historically underserved populations, particularly communities of color. In addition, parent activism through its many configurations has inspired wider struggles for social justice, at times developing a significant capacity to influence policymakers and to increase educational access and opportunities (Fraga & Frost, 2011; Worgs, 2011). In the words of Warren and Mapp (2011), “rather than remaining the passive victims of an unjust system, parents and young people are becoming active agents in their schools and communities” (p. 4) through grassroots parent organizing.

The study of the factors that impact—and at times mobilize—parent activism among communities with lower socioeconomic and educational indicators necessarily involves an examination of schooling in the context of social inequality, poverty, and its consistent companion, political marginalization (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Along these lines, an effort to contextualize parent activism in schools must also include an analysis of the policies that legitimize inequality in society, as well as an exploration of the social forces that have historically resisted and challenged oppressive educational policies and practices (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2004–2005, 2012; Muñoz, 1989; San Miguel, 1996; Smith, 1998; Warren, 2011). Wells, Anyon, and Oakes (2011) portray the context of the relationship between many working class families and their children's schools in a dramatic, yet realistic fashion:

Holding two low-wage jobs to make ends meet can sap the energy of a parent and make it more difficult for her to negotiate the public systems and advocate for her children. Being poor in a rich country can lead to ill-placed shame, pervasive despair, and anger. Living in poverty means experiencing daily crises of food, finding a place to live, and keeping your children safe. All this can be debilitating and can certainly dampen the enthusiasm, effort, and outlook with which urban children and their families approach K–12 education. (Wells et al., 2011, p. 189)

In this context, the history of parent activism in schools, although clearly impacted by poverty and discrimination with all its daily challenges, also involves individual and communal processes of resistance and empowerment, at times carried out with remarkable levels of sophistication in its modes of participation and organizing, a communal process of self-determination and engagement which often develops its own grammar of internal democracy and participation (Lichterman, 1996). It is within this realm of emerging solidarity and mobilization among low-income families from communities of color that parent activism can become central to challenging discriminatory practices at the local level with the potential of reshaping educational and life prospects for all students.

The potential of parent activism to become a critical tool for progressive school reform, although clearly documented and examined in the literature, is impacted by external and internal factors that affect the outcome of these communities' struggles for quality education (Wells et al., 2011). In this context, parent activism in schools emerges against a backdrop of urban and rural poverty, competing for attention with daily survival needs for decent jobs, housing, health care, and basic services. In the real world, school-focused parent activism is often a challenging proposition for families and community groups, since these efforts are regularly impacted by scant or nonexistent funding for social initiatives and by the diverse and often contrasting agendas of its natural allies, such as community organizations, labor unions, and grassroots educational and political organizations. However, even in these difficult contexts, parent activism is increasingly becoming a most endearing and critical struggle for its participants because they see it as central to their families' and their community's future (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012). It is in this context of smaller scale organizing initiatives that the need for trust, solidarity, and vision among the participants becomes the key for any hope of success in achieving significant change in local schools, as families engage in a process in which "enhanced feelings of interpersonal trust and reciprocity can lead to effective political engagement and policy" (Henig, 2011, p. 67). Closer to this study, family organizing experiences such as the one examined in the following pages

should be understood as an addition to this emerging area of inquiry in an effort to help model effective partnerships for school reform among underserved communities.

Methods and Data Analysis

The examination of parent organizing at a middle school I will call North Side is part of a larger two-year study conducted at the site in Northern California. This is an ethnographic research endeavor that involved understanding dynamic developments in a social phenomenon as it evolves in context (Weiss, 1998). At the heart of this study are the following research questions: Can the examination of highly localized, smaller-scale grassroots efforts shed light on how to articulate authentic parent engagement towards strategic family–school partnerships? What is the nature of the events and processes that support the emergence and development of parent activism in the context of historically underserved populations?

In addressing these questions throughout this study, my role was that of a participant observer, a stance that engages a capacity to record, describe, and analyze behaviors and interactions with proven focus on reliability and relevance while involved in the examined phenomenon within its context (Gans, 1999). Applying this notion to this investigation, 22 parent activists and community informants were interviewed throughout the process, using pseudonyms for identification. Over 200 hours of community meetings and events were recorded, transcribed, color-coded, and organized according to thematic strands.

The participants in this study are Spanish-speaking members of lower income Latino families, all of them immigrants of Mexican origin with no more than five years in the United States. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, translated to English, and systematically shared with bilingual community partners for accuracy, validity, and integrity of translation and meaning. These partners included a parent organizer who was involved since the initial family meetings on the math placement, a bilingual teacher who became involved in addressing the families' concerns, as well as two members of a local community organization who joined the participants at a later stage to support their mobilization efforts. The transcribed interviews were also shared on an informal basis with groups of participants for additional input. The triangulation of data was of particular importance since this study is an examination of the deeper meanings and understandings of the participants who were impacted and changed throughout their process of activism and because *their* interpretation of those transformations are at the heart of this study. This methodological approach also reflects an effort to “explain more fully the richness and complexity

of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint” (Cohen & Manion, 2000, p. 254).

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis the author’s interactions vis-à-vis the informant community were guided by Bruner’s (1994) notion towards interpreting and reinterpreting personal experience in a process where narrative and life are seen as profoundly intertwined. The value of personal narratives in context is also a significant undercurrent throughout this effort, in a manner consistent with Beverley’s (2005) approach to *testimonios*, understood here as a means of giving analytical center stage to society’s subaltern voices in articulating an in-depth sociohistorical examination. In analyzing *community*, this study approaches this notion in a dynamic fashion, understanding it as a fluid entity that is historically impacted and often binds human histories and endeavors through shared interests, subjectivities, and visions of society and life. It is an ethnographic stance also informed by the work of Bertaux and Kohli (1984), who posed that personal narratives have the power to encapsulate sociohistorical complexities and contradictions in a context where subjectivity plays a central role in human agency.

The Workings of Parent Activism

The following sections include a description of a series of specific interactions, which are chronicled and analyzed below as an example of a trigger event, in the context of this particular process of school-focused community involvement. A trigger event is understood here as a critical juncture which helps commit and mobilize a group of individuals, propelling them to transform concerns into dispositions and dispositions into collective actions.

Trigger events in the context of social mobilization often take place as a result of significant situations charged of symbolic meaning (Jasis, 2000), and such was the case of the environments and interactions examined in this study. The math placement challenge described below, as well as the resulting meetings among the students’ parents and between parents and teachers, are seen here as a trigger event because it captured the contradictions, main motivations, and complex dynamics that were critical to the emerging organizing capacity of the participants in this context, their determination and vision, as well as the multilevel impact of their actions in the school community.

The Context for This Study

North Side Middle School is located in a formerly industrial area of a mid-size Northern California city. It is a large and diverse institution of almost a thousand students, where the Latino student population grew from a total

of 11% to over 23% of the student body in the two years prior to this study. The performance of Latino students at North Side was considerably lower on standardized tests than many of their classmates. While European American students performed at 92% of the national rate for reading, Latinos performed at 42%. Tests in math showed a similar academic gap: Latino seventh graders at North Side scored at 46% of the national average, while their European American counterparts scored at 83%. At the time of this study, the school was engaging in a serious effort to provide increased academic support to address the academic achievement gap, and while plans included suggestions on parental participation, Latino parents began to organize at North Side on their own initiative to support their children's education. The following narrative chronicles and examines their efforts.

From the Trenches: Indignation and Collective Action

The parents' meeting is being held at the local library, a few blocks away from the town's only middle school. This is an older building, with large posters on the walls in which well-known media personalities promote reading with children and families. Martha Gutierrez, the mother of an eighth grader at North Side Middle School, joins the meeting a bit late this cold evening. The deliberations had started 20 minutes earlier, and 42 parents and grandparents from North Side Middle School briefly introduced themselves to the full group, as many of them have done every Wednesday for the last three months. All of them are recent Latino immigrants, and their introductions are in Spanish. Some of the women hold younger children in their laps, while many of their older siblings play hopscotch and soccer in a spacious parking lot behind the main reading room. For 11 of the participants, this is the first parents' meeting they ever attended; they found out about it through word of mouth, most of them personally invited by the parents of their children's classmates.

Mrs. Gutierrez's entrance is fast and deliberate, and her expression is stern. She catches the immediate attention of many of the participants who briefly direct their looks at her and away from Susana Durán, a volunteer parent organizer who helped write today's agenda and is presenting her detailed ideas for a *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebration at the school. Mrs. Gutierrez acknowledges the attention of the parents and grandparents in attendance, smiles quickly as she sits down and immediately returns to her more serious demeanor, directing her looks firmly towards the presenter. Soon after taking a seat, she begins to bounce her right knee repeatedly in her chair in a sign of impatience. Noticing her urgency to speak, Mrs. Durán pauses her presentation to introduce Mrs. Gutierrez to her audience, in a dialogue translated here from Spanish:

Mrs. Durán: (with a smile) Hi Martha, I'm glad you made it! Well, you all met Mrs. Gutierrez at other family meetings before, I think she has something important to share with us...

Mrs. Gutiérrez: (still with a serious demeanor, but forcing out a slight smile) Hi, everyone! ... look Susana and all parents, the truth is that this time I am very upset!... I only now happened to find out, just this morning, that the math my children have been taking these years will not be good for **anything! Even if they do well it will not help them in high school!** [Note: bold denotes speaker's emphasis]

Mrs. Durán: ... perhaps we can discuss that later ...

Mrs. Gutierrez: No! I'd rather discuss it now! ... because I am sure there are many parents that don't know about this, and **they need to know!**

Mr. Sotelo (a parent): Susana, it seems that this is something very important for everybody that should be included in the agenda and discussed tonight.

Mrs. Durán: I guess you are right Martha... let's discuss it tonight and see what we can all do about this.

The prior dynamics at the meeting are visibly shaken, and the agenda is about to be modified to accommodate new—and apparently more urgent—issues. All participants now seem absorbed by the interactions between Mrs. Durán and Mrs. Gutiérrez, as they direct sustained looks at both women, denoting increased interest in the topics brought up by the discussion. Soon the same attention is directed at Mr. Sotelo when he intervenes. Eventually, Mrs. Durán regains control of the proceedings by saying, “OK, let's discuss what Martha brings up, but as soon as we are done with the preparations for the *Día de los Muertos*.”

The suggestion was accepted, and several parents including Mrs. Gutiérrez nod in response. After an easing of tensions, the logistics for the Day of the Dead celebration are quickly agreed upon, and new voices emerge among the group as they listen to Mrs. Gutierrez's information about a lower level of math and science being taught to many of their children at the local middle school. After describing her recent conversation with her daughter's teacher, Mrs. Gutierrez invites the parents in attendance to discuss possible group strategies to bring the issue effectively in front of teachers and administrators and to agree on a joint plan of action to respond to her new findings. At this point in the deliberations the parent-activists have recognized the importance of the information and the need to share it with a wider audience in the community, while exploring a terrain of negotiation within the context of the school. The discussions elicit the emergence of new voices, among them Mrs. Barragán. She is a soft-spoken garment worker by trade who has two daughters in the school and wants to make sure that any inquiry by the parents should be seen in a respectful, collaborative spirit by school personnel.

Mrs. Barragan: I think this is a very important issue affecting the children, and Martha should be able to bring it to a meeting with the teachers and the principal because it really affects us all, but if we ask for a meeting with them, they have to feel respected by us, and **then** we can ask any questions, because they will see that we are the children's parents—that we are concerned and just want them to be motivated to succeed!

Mrs. Gutiérrez wants to focus attention on planning a joint meeting with parents and teachers, where the math placement and the assessment criteria can be clearly explained to the families and where changes can be proposed. These are her words:

I want to hear directly from them, because maybe we don't have all the information about this, but if we see that they have to change something in the way they teach, well, they should change it!

After voicing their ideas, the participants agreed to call the math teachers and the school principal for a dialogue about the school's class placement criteria and to suggest alternatives. They also decided to create a five-member subcommittee in charge of formulating 10 basic questions to be asked to the attending teachers at the planned dialogue, to take place within the following three weeks.

The math placement issue is discussed, a consistent plan of action is established, and a date for the next meeting is agreed upon. As these issues are discussed, an increasing level of engagement by all parents in attendance is apparent; they follow all deliberations intently, at times nodding in approval or making brief comments to people seated in adjacent chairs. The three remaining items in their agenda are then tabled for the next meeting because of lack of time, and the meeting is adjourned.

Soon the families with their children leave the library room in a celebratory mood, many hug one another, several of the adults in attendance help put the trash away, while two of the mothers offer the rest of the pastries, cookies, sodas, and coffee to other participants to take home. Three women and a man—Mr. Sotelo—are standing in a circle around Mrs. Gutiérrez, who is answering questions about additional information she has about the math placements. Soon she also starts walking slowly towards the door, followed by her two children and her audience of four parents. On her way out, Mrs. Durán says "*ahí nos vemos!*" ("see you soon!") and hugs Mrs. Gutiérrez when both reach the door, in a gesture that seems to soften the tension resulting from their earlier interactions.

Parent Organizing: The First Steps

Within days, a parent committee was formed to discuss the math issues and placements, and preparatory meetings were held. Two weeks later, at a meeting called and attended by many of the school's Latino families with the support of the school principal, a small group of math and science teachers explained—with the help of a bilingual teacher—the reasons for having two different levels of math with segregated students. In turn, many of the parents in attendance described how they perceived this as a separated and discriminatory system, to which the teachers responded by promising to reassess their practice to facilitate access for all students to more challenging curricula and opportunities for increased learning. The parents accepted the teachers' suggestions but asked them to meet again the following month to assess their progress, which was accepted by all. Interviewed after the meeting, Mrs. Durán, now firmly involved in the math discussions, explained the importance of the issues at stake.

Now all the parents realize that without a good math [foundation], our children will fail in high school, they just won't have a chance, so here it gets decided how well they'll do in the future.

Mr. Sotelo, who was clearly impressed with the emerging negotiating skills of his fellow participants at the parents' group, expanded on the strategic aspects of the process as he assessed the balance of power among the school's critical stakeholders.

We are much stronger together; now we ask the teachers for information as a group, and it is much harder to ignore us....I think it is also better for the teachers, because they see our interest and can explain their ideas to us all at once.

As a result of the initial interactions, the meetings between parents and teachers became a bimonthly occurrence at North Side, which eased tensions and misgivings on both sides and helped open the doors to more challenging learning for an increasing number of Latino students at the school. It also promoted a more assertive presence of Latino immigrant families in the North Side school community which, according to many of the teachers, increased the students' sense of pride and joint accountability, reflecting positively on their academic performance.

Stephen Jones, the school principal, believes that the efforts of the school's families increased communication and mutual understanding between math and science teachers and the mobilized parents. He reflected on the process in the following manner:

These parents were rightly concerned about their children's performance, because we needed to clarify how these placements were put in place. After some initial tension, I believe all sides were able to better accommodate to each other and that helped students be better represented with better instruction. I think that was a factor on the kids doing better in these subjects, and it was an education for all of us.

Partly due to these parent-inspired changes, later that year three Latino students were, for the first time, included in North Side's Honor Roll, an unprecedented achievement for this emerging community at the school.

The Math Placement Issue: Challenging Exclusion at the School

Through their high level of engagement in the math placement challenge at North Side Middle School, the parent activists transformed the concerns of Mrs. Gutierrez into a communal quest for information and a call for collective action. In the process, they realized the relevance of the issues involved in the math controversy, as well as their own lack of information regarding placement and teaching criteria at the school. Their deliberations and their joint strategies, as well as the clarity of their demands as they shared their concerns with the math teachers, led them into a deeper discussion about how the school system is organized, who decides what is taught to their children, under what criteria those decisions are made, and who ultimately may benefit from unequal opportunities. Before the first meeting with teachers, Mr. Torres, a father of a seventh grader, ventured his own theory about curricular and placement decisions:

I don't know who decides what type of math the children will study, but I heard that that it is decided by people at the district, other times people at a university...what is sure is that we need to call the teachers to clarify it to us so we can understand it and help our children learn better. This is a public school, and all children should have a chance.

Mr. Torres' comments were followed by comments from other parents, who posed different ideas and theories about what institutions or individuals actually decided curriculum and placements in schools. At the end of the discussion, all agreed that their children's teachers and the school principal probably had some critical bearing on these decisions and that they were the first ones who needed to address their concerns.

Throughout their deliberations, there was also an emergence of new voices that had not been heard in past meetings, including the comments of three *abuelos* (grandparents) in attendance. One of them was Griselda Montañó, a matronly presence at her 68 years of age, who was excited about the opportunity

she had to let a teacher in attendance know of her granddaughter's deep disappointment over the perception that her science project had not been taken seriously or fairly graded:

I told her teacher about how much dedication my granddaughter put into that project and how proud she was the night before she brought it to school, and then how sad she felt when it was returned to her without any comments and with a low grade. After that, my granddaughter told me she didn't even like coming to school anymore, she was really demoralized. The teacher needed to know what happened, and at the meeting she promised to have a conversation with her and to review her project again. **That was so important to me!**

Mrs. Montaña also added, with a proud grin, that it was the first time she had ever spoken at a meeting, or even publicly at all beyond the confines of her home.

I am used to talking to my children and grandchildren all the time, but never in public, but then the teachers and the principal were really listening to us, and the other parents made me feel strong and motivated to speak.

Months later, North Side's school principal, Mr. Jones, would echo Mrs. Montaña's reflections as he recalled the math placements' deliberation process with the following comments:

I know that the conversation about math and science initiated by the Latino parents really helped the school hear directly from them; some of it may have been frustration and some of it miscommunication, but it definitely made us more aware of these students' needs and challenges and of their parents' true appreciation for education.

Parent Empowerment and a Challenging Stance

Guadalupe Valdés (1996) wrote a critical portrayal of school institutions where Latino immigrant parents were often expected by school personnel to assume a subordinate position. She described how, in the views of many educators, parents were expected to quietly visit their children's classrooms during school functions, accept the teacher's prescriptions without question, and passively support their decisions. In contrast to that image and throughout their process of engagement, the parent activists at North Side offered a very different picture of Latino families and their changing relationship to schools. This was a group of concerned and increasingly organized parents attempting to understand and later challenge entrenched school practices, expecting to assert

their right to obtain the institutional information they deserved, and ready to change a status quo they perceived as being discriminatory towards their children. Throughout this process, the parent-activists developed a willingness and the ability to inquire in-depth about established school practices, while collectively articulating a disposition to transform them.

During their process of deliberations and decision-making, the Latino parents at North Side also began to articulate their unique modes of participation and independence, as well as an emerging disposition toward self-determination, well exemplified by the inclusive manner in which they strategized before their meeting with school personnel. At a preparatory session, Mrs. Durán, a leading parent volunteer at the school, proposed that the parents prepare a list of 10 questions that they wanted addressed by the math teachers. She explained her suggestion to her peers in the following terms:

I think that if we prepare these questions beforehand, we can decide which are the most important ones, that way we won't forget anything or confuse ourselves, and it is going to be easier for the teachers to answer.

At this point (I was observing and taking notes about the meeting), I was asked by a parent (Mr. Sotelo) if I could help them prepare their questions. I suggested that I would rather help them review the questions once a smaller committee of parents had selected and discussed them. As several parents nodded in approval, they proposed to schedule an additional, smaller meeting within the following days when the list of questions would be generated and discussed. The parents also agreed to provide me with the questions for review immediately after their meeting. Then, Mr. Sotelo added a relevant observation with a confident smile:

Pablo, we wouldn't give you the questions for your approval, they are **just for your review.**

And with that friendly note of caution, their message of independence—as well as their newly found disposition towards parent empowerment—came across loud and clear.

From Indignation to Critical Collaboration

The emerging parent empowerment process at North Side Middle School, however localized and small in scale, was indicative of a larger and increasingly significant trend towards broader public engagement by communities that have traditionally been underserved by public schools (Orr & Rogers, 2011; Warren, 2011). This trend was also reflected among the Latino parents at North Side, where their disposition towards parent activism and school engagement was clearly galvanized throughout the math placement controversy.

Their increasingly assertive interactions with school personnel and their own discovery process provided their parent group with a trigger event, in this case the math placement challenge. Their sense of collective injustice, what Paulo Freire (1994) would call their pedagogy of indignation, provided the spark that helped these families mobilize beyond their informal meetings. The importance of this event is that it triggered a qualitative change in consciousness among these parents, energizing their organizing activities, motivating a collective assessment of the school's internal balance of power, and helping them formulate joint strategies to address the perceived discriminatory practices affecting their children's schooling.

Conceptualizing their math placement challenge and all their related meetings as trigger events can help us understand how these junctures engaged the participants with previously private and buried levels of discontent. In the context of the Latino parent meetings at North Side, the math placement controversy created the conditions needed for the parents to articulate an existing, latent sense of injustice and frustration with established school policies. Woliver (1992) describes trigger events such as this one as "segmentary and reticulate" (p. 153), meaning that they are particular moments of significant interactions that remain in the collective memory as a *net* of occurrences that are symbolic of larger, unequal relations of power. In the context of North Side and in the views of the parents, the math placement controversy was symbolic of the unequal interactions between them and the school's teachers, clearly exemplified in the following narrative from Mrs. Ramos. She is an active parent at North Side, who shared during the initial parent meeting one of her frustrating moments when interacting with school personnel. She described her encounter with one of her son's teachers in the following terms:

The teacher always offered to help, but when I started asking why this or why that, or when I told her what I really wanted to know, that I wanted to find out how things were really going in the school for my son, then she didn't like it, she complained to the principal that I was questioning her ability as a teacher.

Disappointing experiences between teachers and parents can accumulate over time and become a negative marker of the gap between low-income families and schools. They often encapsulate the frustrations, the hopes, and the struggles of marginalized families and communities as they interact with their local schools. These experiences can have the dual potential of either preventing a healthier relationship between parents and schools or—as it happened throughout this whole process—of forging common bonds of solidarity and action that can significantly *improve* the school climate.

At the individual level, their activism was felt by most of the parents with a palpable sense of urgency, transformation, and—ultimately—empowerment at the heart of their process of discovery and through their interactions with the school personnel. These feelings were galvanized as Mrs. Gutiérrez decided to share and problematize (Shor, 1993) her outrage over a perceived act of injustice impacting the community's children, transforming her indignation into a collective quest for change within the safety of her familiar community of parents. Her fellow parents, in turn, responded with what Hargraves and Fullan (1998) call “going deeper” (p. 67) in their commitment, that is, defining and reflecting on the issues involved and the long-term educational implications that restricting access to quality learning could have for their children's future, assessing the school context as well as the possible responses of school personnel, while engaging collectively in a disposition to change the situation.

As a result of the math placement process and the regular meetings held since then by all stakeholders at North Side, ultimately a closer relationship developed between parents and teachers. Over time and as both sides overcame their initial reservations, the meetings helped established a positive dialogue between them that promoted closer cooperation and an emerging partnership which enhanced the children's schooling and generally improved the school climate for all students. Mrs. Ramos summarized the feelings of many of the participating parents about the closer cooperation between Latino parents and teachers at North Side with the following reflections:

By attending the meetings, I learned to understand the frustrations of the teachers and about the importance of supporting the children together. We need to have more communication with the teachers, because sometimes our own children don't treat them with a lot of respect, and then, when the teachers react, the children come and tell us that they were mistreated. But we have to be in the school to see those things, and in that sense these meetings really helped me.

Mrs. Ramos' empathy and understanding towards the teachers' needs and challenges at North Side indicate a remarkable attitudinal change in the parents' disposition, departing from a sense of alienation from the school and moving towards critical collaboration with the teachers. The parents' emerging awareness of the needs—and at times the struggles—of the different actors in the school community became the basis for a more equal collaboration between parents and teachers at the school. According to the parents' testimonies, their increased participation at the school helped increase their empathy towards their children's teachers, as they better understood the constraints of their work and their daily struggles. Mrs. Gutiérrez, the leading voice in the math placement issue, reflected on this aspect of the process in the following terms:

Thanks to the meetings we had with the teachers, I began to understand the work of the teachers and, sometimes, their frustrations and how important it is to work with them to help the children.

Mrs. Gutiérrez's reflections confirmed that the parents' committed, strategic activism became a deciding factor in establishing a more inclusive and mutually beneficial partnership with their children's teachers. The parents' mobilization around the math placement issue, and particularly the regular parent–teacher meetings held afterwards, opened additional avenues for family–school collaborations, including the creation and institutionalization of participatory structures within the school. Among these new avenues of engagement, the participants cited: the creation of an inclusive Multicultural Parents' Council, which was to meet on a quarterly basis to discuss schoolwide issues and plans; the formalization of daily parent visits to classrooms to observe and support teacher-led activities; increased parent engagement in extracurricular activities; and the translation to various languages of all materials and proceedings that required parental participation at the school. Based on our interviews, involved teachers, parents, and students in the school community think positively of these initiatives, and although the permanence of these changes is still an open question, they believe that they have clearly helped improve educational opportunities at North Side, enhancing the school climate for all students.

Lessons From the Families at North Side

The activist engagement of Latino families at North Side Middle School had a significant effect in the school community. It was a process that involved a remarkable challenge to entrenched educational practices that the parents perceived as exclusionary towards their children, and while intended to address an immediate need for equalized access to challenging curriculum, it also engaged all participants in a larger reflection about equity in education, decision making in society, and the power of organized parent solidarity. In the process, it also helped establish a stronger and more equal partnership between the parents, their children's teachers, and the school administrators, ultimately resulting in improved educational opportunities for all students at the school.

The math placement challenge examined in this study was the central issue that fueled the families' activism at the school, followed by other pivotal moments such as their critical parent–teacher meetings about student placements and the changing interactions between the participants and school personnel. The increased parent engagement throughout this process provided valuable opportunities for the families to develop and exercise a new disposition of independence and an increased appreciation for the value of education

as the primary tool towards a brighter future for their children. To effect actual change, the parent activists bonded through their common, often disappointing, prior experiences with the school and used their meetings as opportunities to share their feelings and as a basis to engage in serious deliberations and effective planning. Through this process, an alternative and more hopeful vision of schooling emerged, populated with better opportunities for their children and infused with a stronger sense of fairness, respect, compassion, and collaboration in their interactions with school personnel. In this context, the families also demonstrated the potential of local parent organizing in equalizing their children's access to higher quality instruction in an environment where teachers and administrators became increasingly open to *empowered* parent engagement and more responsive to interactions that were focused on improving school achievement for all students. This experience also points to what is often a condition for any meaningful interactions between families and schools to take place: that concerned parents not be seen as threats to established school norms or to the perceived power status of teachers and administrators. Rather, the many positive outcomes of this process emphasize the value of welcoming parents at the education table as indispensable, knowledgeable, and contributing partners in the schooling of their children.

The effects of the process of parent organizing at North Side were felt during the following years, increasing the levels of diverse parent participation at the school and, according to teachers and families, helping improve academic achievement among Latinos and other underserved student populations at the school. However, the prospect of a sustained effort towards parent activism at the school as a long-term proposition is less clear at this point in the process. The permanence of the parent mobilization at the school will certainly depend on the ability of the parent activists to invite participation from the incoming students' families, as well as on the willingness of teachers and administrators to institutionalize the families' presence in the school community. Additionally, the process at North Side showed that informed, inclusive, and respectful dialogue and engagement among students, teachers, parents, and administrators is a solid foundation to improve schooling at the local level, helping transition students and their families from a sense of indignation and disengagement toward meaningful avenues for educational collaboration.

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Pablo Jasis is an assistant professor of education at the Elementary and Bilingual Education Department, College of Education, California State University, Fullerton. His scholarly interests include diversity in education, the relationship between minority families and schools, parent and community empowerment, Latino education, cultural studies, migrant and adult education, and critical pedagogy. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Jasis at the Department of Elementary and Bilingual Education, California State University, Fullerton, P.O. Box 6868, Fullerton, CA 92834-6868 or email pjasis@fullerton.edu