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PROBLEMATIZING URBAN PARENTS' SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT: EXPLORING PARENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENSES OF LIBERALISM AND POST-COLONIAL THEORY

BACKGROUND – WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT PARENT ENGAGEMENT?

Parent engagement in schools is a persistent issue facing our communities. This is important because the relationships among teachers, students, and families can favorably influence student school engagement and achievement[1]. Understanding that all families are involved with school in different ways Epstein's typology for parent engagement includes six fundamental components, or types, of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community[2]. Ideally, if all six types of parent involvement are present in the partnership, children's learning and development will be stimulated[3]. However, many of the aspects of Epstein's model have not been directly identified in the research on family engagement low income families[4]. A better understanding of which aspects of this model are most appropriate and applicable to low income, urban families could inform what types of programming and interventions to focus on and help identify strengths in programs.

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[1] M.A. Kraft, S.M. Dougherty, *The effect of teacher-family communication on student engagement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment*, "Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness" 2013, 6(3), pp. 199–222; T.T. Williams, B. Sanchez, *Identifying and decreasing barriers to parent involvement for inner-city parents*, "Youth & Society" 2011, 45(1), pp. 54–74.

[2] J.L. Epstein, S.L. Dauber, *School programs and teacher practices of parent involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools*, "The Elementary School Journal" 1991, 91, pp. 289–305; J.L. Epstein et al., *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*, 3rd ed., Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA 2009.

[3] J.L. Epstein et al., *School, family…*

[4] J.L. Epstein, S.L. Dauber, *School programs…*

Similarly, while Karen Mapp and Anne Henderson posit that "all parents – regardless of income, education, or cultural background – are involved in their children's learning and want their children to do well"[5] in many school communities a limited, one-sided view of what constitutes parent involvement prevails and negatively impacts how parents' actions and involvement are regarded by school professionals. Bower and Griffin discuss that "traditional definitions of parental involvement require investments of time and money from parents, and those who may not be able to provide these resources are deemed uninvolved"[6]. These barriers make parent engagement, as it is currently constituted, in low income families seem unreliable, inconsistent, and in some cases nonexistent. A narrow perspective about family engagement can have serious consequences for accommodating all parents and improving involvement. Furthermore these examples show that we have not accomplished as much as we claim to have in terms of multiculturalism and acceptance[7].

Similarly, research on parent engagement indicates that parents are encouraged to be involved in a number of aspects of the school partnership but, their involvement is limited to the school's vision for how parents should be involved[8]. Rarely are the parents themselves asked what they would like from an intervention or service. In this way, autonomy is taken away from the families and their involvement is qualified and determined for them by restrictive, normalizing practices. This research stands in contrast to Stone's conceptualization of civic capacity which is defined as "the extent to which different sectors of the community act in concert around a matter of community wide import"[9]. Clarke, Hero, Sidney, Fraga and Erlichson interpret Stone's perspective on collective action to mean that "educational reform entails group mobilization and joint action based on shared concerns about educational problems and collective problem solving"[10]. Considering these perspectives and in order for civic engagement to be effective, parents need to first feel efficacious enough and have the knowledge to participate in these ways. Additionally for parents to be truly acting in "concert" their concerns must be considered equally as important and with equal attention as the school's priorities. It is necessary be mindful of the challenges families are facing, the ways parents are involved, and welcome parents in all aspects of the engagement process.

Furthermore, based on Clarke, Hero, Sidney, Fraga and Erlichson text many minority groups, for example low income parents or people of color, whose political participation resides in the second – tier of the political arena many not feel equipped to participate. Further, if they do participate, they may feel that their items of interest are

[5] A.T. Henderson, K.L. Mapp, *The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement*, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002, p. 8.

[6] H.A. Bower, D. Griffin, *Can the Epstein model of parental involvement work in a high-minority, high-poverty elementary school? A case study*, "Professional School Counseling" 2011, 15(2), p. 78.

[7] S.E. Clarke, R.E. Hero, M.S. Sidney, L.R. Fraga, B.A. Erlichson, *Multi-ethnic moments: The politics of urban education reform*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA 2006.

[8] H.A. Bower, D. Griffin, *Can the Epstein model…*

[9] C.N. Stone, Civic Capacity and Urban Education, "Urban Affairs Review" 2001, p. 596.

[10] S.E. Clarke, R.E. Hero, M.S. Sidney, L.R. Fraga, B.A. Erlichson, *Multi-ethnic moments…*, p. 47.

not being attended to and therefore their efforts may be reserved or reluctant because they are not motivated to work toward the reforms that are important to the dominant group, which in this research is the school administration and teachers. There are however a few models of parent engagement that are regarded as successful when it comes to appreciating and garnering parent voice and respecting parents as partners in the school community.

Therefore, having discussed the nature of parent engagement generally in schools and specifically as it relates to the concept of civic capacity, what follows in an explanation of two case studies on parent engagement and specifically as they relate to parent education, capacity building, and advocacy. These case studies will be used to illustrate how the "best" examples of parent engagement are still problematic. This conversation will be guided by the works of texts focused on liberalism and postcolonial theory. This lens will provide a space to critique these programs. Specifically, this paper will explore the concepts of capacity, agency, and empowerment as they relate to the cases and a number of course texts.

CASE STUDIES – CHARTER SCHOOL (AF) PARENT AMBASSADORS PROGRAM & MIAMI THE PARENT ACADEMY (TPA)

Charter School (AF) Parent Ambassadors Program

The Parent Ambassadors Program is a new initiative this year that is being sponsored and hosted by a local charter management organization and piloted at schools in Brooklyn, NY, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. It is an outward facing parent advocacy group that is designed to prepare current charter school parents to testify during the upcoming legislative session on matters related to charter school expansion, school funding, and parent engagement. The program is comprised of monthly workshops for parents that focus on parent education and skill building specifically as it relates to parents participation in the political sector. Fundamentally, the idea is that if parents can increase their knowledge and capacity they can be effective during the legislative season. One major challenge is authentically capturing parents' voices in this work. By the nature of having parents represent AF the school's program is pushing a specific broader agenda. In some ways, parents are being used as a "tool" to get the AF message across more powerfully. In fact, during the monthly workshops, some parents mentioned that when they speak highly of the school their friends ask them if they are being told to say those things. It is concerning that parents who speak so passionately about their experience are worried their friends will perceive their speech as "crafted" or "prepared".

During a recent meeting which was co-facilitated by the nonprofit Rhode Island Mayoral Academies the parents participated in a workshop on "telling your story". This was a great opportunity for the parents and one way to begin to overcome the challenges identified. Parents spoke freely about their story and used a guided worksheet to

brainstorm their story and then begin writing. By giving the parents the resources and support to tell their own stories, parents transitioned from simply reiterating a crafted message to speaking honestly and personally on behalf of AF. However, an additional challenge remains when considering whose story and testimony will be featured on advocacy materials and during the legislative season.

Aside from preparing parents to testify, the program focuses on other elements of advocacy, parent empowerment, and community engagement. Some additional workshops include: overviews of governmental structures, school governance models, and additional ways to support the school's missions and goals. This program is grounded in the ideas of parent power and parent voice. However the extent to which that voice is genuine and considerations regarding how the parent voice is utilized should be questioned. Thus far, it seems that these voices need to be representative or iterative of the message the school wants them to project and subsequently what messages they want others hear. This notion will be discussed further throughout the paper.

Miami – Dade County Public Schools – The Parent Academy (TPA)

In 2004, in Miami – Dade County (Miami), The Parent Academy (TPA) was established by the superintendent, Rudy Crew, to provide training to parents in three areas: "understanding schools and guiding their children's education, increasing their own capacity, [and] to increase parents' employability options"[11]. Crew believed that parents were not involved and not participating in evoking change in their school communities because they were uninformed. He believed that low income parents needed access to the knowledge and information available in "affluent communities"[12]. Initially, the planning and preparation for TPA included parents at every level and intentionally privileged parents' reports in meetings. One criticism of TPA is that it has a core group of supporters who were the "usual suspects". However, the committee agreed that "it's giving parents an opportunity to learn… which empowers them"[13]. Ultimately, TPA was comprised of workshops, Family Learning Events, certification programs and other events totaling nearly 600 events with record breaking parent attendance numbers in 2008. By all appearances, this program was considered hugely successful. Similarly many parents shared sentiments of appreciation for TPA.

However, a closer look at the program and its associated figures indicates there was room for improvement. For one, this administratively supported initiative overshadowed many of the efforts by the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and pressured some of the PTA groups to feel the need to improve so they did not get taken over by a more streamlined program, as explained by parents and administrators. What was presented as a team effort quickly became a program run by a "dean" and a team of

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[11] K. Mapp, E. Brookover, *The parent academy: Family engagement in Miami-Dade County Public Schools*, "Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University" 2010, p. 3.

[12] Ibidem.

[13] Ibidem, p. 4.

administrators who are not on the ground in the school[14]. While TPA appeared to be initially successful, the origins and motivations behind creating this program cannot be ignored in this conversation.

PROBLEMATIZING PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Who Can Speak?

These two cases illuminate a number of issues with parent engagement as it is currently conceptualized. First, Gandhi's discussion of Foucault's work namely that knowledge is directly connected to power and made me consider those who have power should also be knowledgeable[15]. This is recently applicable to the overall goals of the Parent Ambassador Program. Specifically, here I consider, if the parents in the program were not educated and prepared to testify their statements may not be as respected or influential during the legislative session. This knowledge therefore is indicative of access and also status. In the case of the Parent Ambassador Program this program helps parents overcome specific hierarchical systems or limitations to be heard. More explicitly, it seems that without this increased knowledge, they would not have the power to speak during the legislative session.

This reality in regard to the Parent Ambassador Program was similar to Spivak's work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. I reason that for parents' voices to be heard, they need to overcome the barriers and social status in which they reside. Based on Spivak's conclusion that "the subaltern cannot speak"[16], I considered and questioned how ideas of representation are present in the parent ambassador program model. Specifically by whom are subjects, parents, represented? Are the "best" parents recruited to represent the school and what position do these individuals hold? Similarly when parents are representing the school, are they therefore not representing themselves? Are parents considered more respected or more readily heard when they speak on behalf of the school because the school has a good reputation? How does the role of the school or the idea of the school as a vehicle to support parent testimony help elevate parents out of their social position so their voices are heard? When Spivak explains Foucault's perspective she discusses a sentiment which explains that "to make the invisible unseen can also mean a change of level"[17]. I think this can be identified in the Parent Ambassador Program. In many ways, the parents' voice is not genuine when it is used to meet the school's agenda.

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[14] Ibidem, p. 13.

[15] L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial theory: A critical introduction*, Columbia University Press, New York 1998.

[16] G.C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in: C. Nelson, L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL 1988, p. 194.

[17] G.C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?…*, p. 80.

Additionally, recall, the superintendent in Miami believed parents were uninformed and developed TPA program intentionally to build parents' capacity and knowledge. This program was established solely based on presumptions and what administrators considered important and necessary for parents to know and specifically parents needed to acquire the knowledge that was present in the "affluent communities" to be a part of the system. In this way, parents were expected to overcome their own social class and aspire to have the knowledge and skills that those in the affluent class possessed. One must question then, once these parents have this increased capacity, are they then "representing" what is expected from, what we already commonly conceptualize as, parent involvement? In these spaces, this type of representation, parent engagement, is still perceived as inadequate by school administrators. It takes voice and also autonomy away from the individuals who are participating by only regarding their involvement as "good" or as "quality" when it looks like, presents like, the way that "affluent communities" are involved. Therefore, when we consider notions of capacity building, what problems are we potentially not addressing?

On Capacity Building

Another component of both the Parent Ambassadors Program and The Parent Academy (TPA) was capacity building. This is important because this program goal aligns with the U.S. Department of Education Dual Capacity Building Framework[18]. Here, capacity relates to the "knowledge of student learning and the workings of the school system… [and] skills in advocacy and educational support"[19]. Additionally, research from Doherty, Jacob and Cutting's Community Engaged Parent Education program, based on the foundational notion that parent education can "provide a public space for parents to claim their voice as citizens"[20], and that parent education and parent educators "can learn to combine the personal and public dimensions of parenting in everyday parent education"[21] to have positive outcomes based on measures of actions performed by parents and community members. In this way, capacity is the presentation of the satisfactory performance of behaviors indicative of positive involvement as identified most often by people who are not parents in that community or who are administrators therefore deemed qualified to set these parameters. Essentially in both cases, parents are expected to possess a certain level of prerequisite knowledge or skill otherwise it is the obligation of someone above them, presumably with more knowledge to teach them.

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[18] *Partners Education in A dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships*, SEDL & U.S. Department of Education, Austin, TX 2013, available online: http://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf (accessed: 20.10.2015).

[19] *Partners Education…*, p. 10.

[20] W.J. Doherty, J. Jacob, B. Cutting, *Community engaged parent education: Strengthening civic engagement among parents and parent educators*, "Family Relations" 2009, 58(3), p. 314.

[21] Ibidem, p. 313.

Similarly, in *Colonizing Egypt*, Mitchell discusses the idea that "the progress of a nation was conditional upon the growth in the power of its elite"[22]. This type of intentional aspiration to achieve the knowledge and skills that the affluent class has reminds me of this notion. In Miami the elites, specifically the administrators organized parent education to emulate the system of education and parental involvement they desired. As mentioned previously, many of the current parent engagement programs are not appropriately serving low income families. Rather, these programs are best suited for middle class families and have been most successful in communities with different or fewer challenges. In Miami, rather than accommodating parents differently or considering the strengths of the families in their community, they instead reinstituted the expectations and practices of the affluent parents in a way, assuring the stability of that specific type of involvement and bolstering the "elite".

Mitchell also discusses that "by developing this capacity to the fullest extent, the community gained its strength and acquired the ability to dominate others"[23]. Similarly, in the case of the Parent Ambassadors Program, once parents are trained the primary objective is to achieve the intended outcome in the legislative session ultimately through delivering a powerful, dominating testimony on behalf of the charter school. Additionally, Mitchell mentions the ability to "use the language" as an element of capacity building. This is directly evident in the cases discussed above. In the case of the Parent Ambassador Program, as previously mentioned, one of the purposes of the program is to teach parents and prepare them to testify. While the "telling your story" workshop, discussed above, may have started to capture parents' genuine voices, what is interesting is that those stories were then collected, compiled, and edited by a professional communication specialist for Rhode Island Mayoral Academies. In this way, the "language" was altered and edited to be most influential and so that it would resonate with readers of a higher social class. In the same vein, the upcoming parent testimonies will be scripted and rehearsed to match the language of the elite, similar to the "endless drilling and practice" that Mitchell describes, before parents are allowed to represent this school community and until it can accomplish its intended outcome.

Really Empowered?

Another goal of the Parent Ambassador Program is to empower parents to be active in the political sphere. One of the main slogans of the Parent Ambassador Program is #ParentPower. Here Wendy Brown's discourse regarding empowerment in *States of Injury* complements this discussion. Brown suggests that,

> the notion of empowerment articulates that feature of freedom concerned with action, with being more than the consumer subject figured in discourses of rights and economic democracy… they risk establishing a wide chasm between the (experience of) empow-

[22] T. Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 124.
[23] Ibidem, p. 89.

erment and an actual capacity to shape the terms of political, social, or economic life. Indeed, the possibility that one can "feel empowered" without being so informs and important element of legitimacy for the antidemocratic dimensions of liberalism[24].

In the context of the cases, this makes me consider whether or not parents, on their own volition have the freedom and access to create change. For example, if not for this program would parents feel capable of testifying? Additionally, would these parents be aware of the opportunity to testify and the political decisions that could ultimately influence their school? This question reminds me of an overarching question of whether an individual's "status" exists prior to their receipt of knowledge or as a result of their accrual of knowledge. That is to say, do parents feel capable of testifying because they received information from these workshops or were they selected, based on their previous participation, as good candidates to testify and because of their "status" within the school they were given the information that was necessary for them to participate in this role?

Is this program, as a lever of parent empowerment, simultaneously granting voice, freedom, to parents and limiting it? Moreover, is the allusion of empowerment so enticing that parents are not distinguishing between "the (experience of) empowerment and an actual capacity to shape the terms of political, social, or economic life"[25]? That is to say, if parents were to speak on behalf of their experiences without being coached or trained would their words be as powerful? Is this reality the difference between perceived power and actual capacity to influence politics? Here, what I consider genuine voice is masked by tactical approaches to shaping the political arena.

Earlier, Stone's idea of civic capacity was introduced. Stone posits that if all voices are present in the area and acting around an issue of community wide import then positive change can be made. Interestingly, here is seems that parents' interests may be masked by the school's objectives. In this way, what is advertised as empowerment is, more appropriately, another way for the school to dictate how parents should be involved and then praise parents', complacency, involvement accordingly. To address the earlier question of 'to what extent", seemingly, parent voice is valued to the extent to which parents "feel empowered" and to the extent to which parents can instrumentalize change that aligns with the school's agenda as opposed to their own.

Another interpretation of empowerment resides in the language of resistance and power. As Brown explains Foucault's perspective, "Where there is power, there is resistance"[26]. Furthermore, Brown explains that "the language of resistance implicitly acknowledges the extent to which protest always transpires inside the regime; "empowerment", in contrast, registers the possibility of generating one's capacities… without capitulating to constraints by particular regimes of power"[27]. As I understand this, in

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[24] W. Brown, *States of injury: Power and freedom in late modernity*, vol. 6, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1995, p. 23.

[25] Ibidem, p. 23.

[26] Ibidem, p. 22.

[27] Ibidem.

relation to the cases, this type of "empowerment", as seen in the Parent Ambassadors Program, may also resemble an act of resistance to the dominant structures, or legislation. This may be especially evident as the Parent Ambassadors Program is preparing parents to speak in opposition, resistance, of the current legislation. Here, empowerment is again nested in the language of capacity building and possibility of change. This interesting rhetoric caused me to consider more deeply the extent to which this program is operating as a mode of empowerment or more like an act of resistance as I could identify elements of both perspectives in the case. Ultimately, these initiatives are upheld by aspirations of advocacy and furthermore of parents as agents of change.

Agency

One of the main objectives of TPA was to provide parents with resources so they can have the "ability to assist in their child's achievement and success"[28]. Similarly, another objective of the Parent Ambassador Program was to inspire parents to be involved in their communities and community organizations. These two elements of these programs align with Saba Mahmood's conceptualization of agency in *Politics of Piety*. Mahmood presents an idea of agency that veers off from Brown's conversation of resilience and more closely aligns with these cases of parent engagement. Mahmood explains that based on the work of Butler and Foucault agency is the "set of capacities inhering in a subject"[29]. Returning to a conversation about capacity building now, agency and empowerment, as described by Brown more easily relate. Returning again to the notion of skill building and knowledge acquisition, one can then understand these two programs as spaces that cultivate agency rather than simply resilience. As Mahmood explains, agency is more than resilience it is the "capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable"[30]. In this way, parents, as an example of how subordination inhabits certain groups, are called to action based on the education and access they are gaining. However, it is still troubling that other people who reside in higher positions decided that these programs were necessary and approached parent engagement with a deficit mindset.

Considering there is no apparent way to undo structures of power, ultimately Mahmood explains Butler's conceptualization of agency as something that resides within structures of power and that is both sustained and deconstructed through modes of performativity, for example norms. This rationalization helps to frame the work of the Parent Ambassador Program and the TPA. My interpretation follows that these programs necessarily respond to the power and hierarchies questioned previously. For within these structures, and if parents perform as the expectations of their role dictate, agency will both challenge existing norms and simultaneously reinforce them. So,

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[28] K. Mapp, E. Brookover, *The parent academy…*, p. 6.

[29] S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2005, p. 17.

[30] Ibidem, p. 18.

parent voice as a tool for instigating political change or advocacy for students is both empowering and restricting. While, this understanding does not ultimately offer a solution it does provide an explanation that allows us to see the programs and cases as both helpful and potentially, simultaneously harmful for parents.

To conclude, I return to the U.S. Department of Education Dual Capacity Building Framework and the idea that "families need to view themselves as partners in their child's education and must construct their roles in their child's learning to include multiple roles"[31]. The troubling I have demonstrated when considering these programs begs a remaining question that relates to the restrictions within which parents can "construct their roles". These texts and perspectives illustrate a space where paradoxically parents while parents are encouraged to participate and partake in multiple roles in their child's education yet they are only expected to inhabit roles that are imagined and supported by those in higher positions. In this way, ideas about families and the roles and capacities of parents are both minimizing and empowering. The notion that parents need to be taught, educated, brought up to a higher level is frustrating but, as I previously reasoned, with increased capacity comes increased agency. Therefore, within the realm that the school administrators allow, parents are able to use their voice. In this way, parents' perceptions of their roles in their child's education are limited to what is currently constituted as acceptable and is often tied to levels of parental knowledge and capacity. Therefore, and finally, it would be irresponsible to not trouble this idea of capacity building once more. That is to say, what might change and how might these "best" examples of parent engagement be less harmful if rather than perceiving parents as having a deficit and needing knowledge, principals, school administrators, teachers, and parents themselves capitalized on the strengths and knowledge parents already possess about their children and their communities rather than feeling obliged to dispel information and craft parent engagement as it has traditionally been constructed and exemplified in these programs?

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Melissa Lovitz: Problematizing urban parents' school engagement: exploring parent engagement through the lenses of liberalism and post-colonial theory

Abstract: Family engagement favorably influences student achievement, yet information addressing how schools and communities can effectively partner with diverse families remains lacking. This paper examines two examples that are illustrative of the some of "best" examples of parent engagement; yet they are still problematic. Using the theoretical frameworks of liberalism and postcolonial theory, this paper critiques these cases and specifically the concepts of capacity building, agency, and empowerment as they relate to urban parents' school engagement. A critical examination of these cases yields the following conclusion and implication for researchers and practitioners alike: what might change and how might these "best" examples of parent engagement be less harmful if rather than perceiving parents as having a deficit and needing knowledge, principals, school administrators, teachers, and parents themselves capitalized on the strengths and knowledge parents already possess about their children and their communities rather than feeling obliged to dispel information and craft parent engagement as it has traditionally been constructed and exemplified in these programs?