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Integration, not Gentrification: Using Participatory Action Research to Foster Democratic Leadership in an Urban PTA

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This study explores the relationship of a new Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to a historically low-income public school in a gentrifying neighborhood. The PTA was formed by a group of white middle class parents who did not reflect the broader school population. To serve diverse communities, school leaders need to organize families to participate in the school democratically. Utilizing Participatory Action Research (PAR), this study demonstrates that there are no shortcuts to building more democratic parental participation in diverse urban schools: communities need to engage in collaborative inquiry to dismantle barriers to involvement, strengthen the connection between home and school, and recruit and develop more representative leadership.

KEYWORDS: Democratic Leadership, Participatory Action Research, School Gentrification

This study explores the relationship of a new Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to an urban public school in a gentrifying neighborhood. The PTA was formed by a group of white middle-class parents who were new to the community and did not reflect the broader school population. This small, close-knit elementary school had historically served a majority working-class Latino community with a generational tradition: parents and grandparents who had attended the school themselves were raising current students in their same family homes. This established population had only recently been joined by new residents enthusiastically purchasing nearby houses while only selectively enrolling their children in the school. When they did, the PTA was often seen as a vehicle to “fix” the school rather than actively participate in an already thriving community. As one of the white middle-class founders of the PTA and a school leader in-training, I was alarmed that our PTA did not represent the school at large and wanted to learn how we could bring about more democratic parental leadership in the organization.

While there is a growing body of research exploring how schools are impacted by patterns of urban gentrification and segregation, this study is unique in that we used Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a model to integrate our PTA (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Posey, 2012; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007; Sohoni & Saporito, 2009). PAR is a radical cooperative research method where researchers work with participants to enact ongoing collective learning and improvement (Fals Borda, 2013; Fine, 2013; Guishard, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). As the primary researcher on this project, I collaborated with other parents to conduct field research that fostered more democratic parental leadership in the PTA. Through this work, we learned valuable lessons in how to dismantle barriers to involvement, strengthen the connection between home and school, and recruit more representative leaders.
Theoretical Framework

The challenges facing our school and PTA are not unique. With neoliberal policies encouraging the gentrification of urban areas, more and more white middle-class families are choosing to live in cities and send their children to public schools (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Gulson, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Lipman, 2011; Pedroni, 2011; Posey, 2012). While schools would be less segregated if all children attended their neighborhood school rather than selecting private schools or taking advantage of market-inspired school choice policies, this alone would not necessarily promote equality (Saporito & Sohoni, 2007; Sohoni & Saporito, 2009). Though the increase of white middle-class families, with their high levels of involvement and access to resources, are typically seen as being beneficial for the whole school, the actions of this vocal and highly skilled minority can function to exclude lower income families and result in a disproportionately powerful impact for their own children (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Lareau & Munoz, 2012). The middle-class parents who choose to send their children to public schools often do so because of a passionate commitment to diverse neighborhood schools and urban life, yet the ways in which they engage in the community can function to reinforce inequality and segregation (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Posey, 2012; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014).

To forward the goal of social justice and better serve diverse communities, schools need to be democratically organized (Mullen, 2010; Mutchler, 2011; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014; Waite, 2010). Schools both reflect and have the potential to transform our culture: while educational reform mandates are typically top-down, local control must be granted to educators and communities to determine how improvements will be made (Mullen, 2010; Mutchler, 2011; O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014). Educators, families, and communities possess the knowledge and investment to make meaningful improvements in their own schools. The problems confronting our school and PTA are a microcosm of these broader societal trends. This study, as a PAR project built with the local knowledge of a specific community, provides an example for families in other urban schools who want to engage in a collective struggle against inequality.

Method

PAR is a methodological tradition that accounts for the messy and nonlinear but beautiful potential of informed, collaborative problem solving. PAR requires meaningful collaboration, authentic dialogue, and the sharing of expertise between researchers and participants (Freire, 2000; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Rather than conducting research on their participants, participatory action researchers work with them to make changes collectively, breaking down the distinctions between researchers and researched as well as the research-activism dichotomy (Fals Borda, 2013; Fine, 2013; Guishard, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

Though each step became increasingly collaborative as the project developed, initial stages were more driven by my individual questions and investigation. In the first phase of the study, I recruited two main collaborative partners in the research process, Rosa and Julia (all names are pseudonyms). Both were young, bilingual, Latina moms who had attended the school themselves. I had reached out to them because they were new to the PTA and had expressed concerns about their ability to connect with some of the established leaders in the group. Once they agreed to work with me, they took part in the design of the study, data collection and
analysis, presentation of findings, and the implementation of our action plan (Merriam, 2014). To allow for a more emergent and democratic process as findings from previous stages informed subsequent steps, data analysis was ongoing and collaborative (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Merriam, 2014). In many ways, the three of us formed a collaborative research team which functioned as committee within the broader PTA leadership, working on this project as an independent unit while also reporting regularly to the group at large and factoring in their input as we made recommendations to improve PTA practices.

Research Process

**Participant observation.** In my role as lead researcher, I took field notes recording and reflecting on my experience throughout the project, from recruiting collaborators to applying our action plan (Yin, 2011).

**Individual interviews.** Early interviews functioned to not only to provide context for the issues which we would explore as a group, but to also recruit my two primary collaborative partners, Julia and Rosa (Merriam, 2014).

**Parent survey.** During the interview process, both Rosa and Julia suggested that we conduct a parent survey to learn what parents want from the PTA and the school. We compiled open-ended questions based on those brainstormed by the PTA Board and translated them into Spanish (Galletta & Jones, 2010). At various PTA events throughout the school year, the three of us approached parents in both English and Spanish and asked them to complete the survey. We also made the survey available online through the PTA Facebook page and email list. The three of us then reviewed the survey responses to create questions for follow-up group interviews.

**Group interviews.** Julia, Rosa, and I held group interviews with interested parents to discuss the issues shared in the survey in greater depth. We held one group interview session in Spanish and one in English, and the group interviews were conducted by the entire collaborative research team (Galletta & Jones, 2010).

**Analysis and presentation of findings.** Rosa, Julia and I analyzed the survey responses and interview transcripts to identify themes which emerged across the multiple data sources. As a group, we then created a presentation of our findings and shared it with the PTA Board at our Summer Retreat (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

**Application.** Based on the findings presented by the collaborative research team, the PTA Board created and implemented an action plan for the following school year (Torre, 2009).

Positionality

Although collaboration was essential to the success of this project, and individual members of PAR teams bring multiple identities, agendas, and privileges to the table, I nonetheless remained the only scholar and primary researcher (Torre, 2009; Torre & Ayala, 2009). PAR is not a silver bullet but can itself reinforce oppression when individual roles and
group dynamics are not interrogated (Galletta & Jones, 2010; Guishard, 2009). As a white middle-class woman who only speaks English, I represent the recent influx of residents to a gentrifying neighborhood that many established Latino and African American working-class families see as a threat to their long-standing traditions and culture. As I collaborated with Rosa and Julia, I was aware of the way our differing identities shaped this study (Fals Borda, 2013). Ultimately, collective and individual exploration of these issues became integral to the research process.

**Findings**

To foster democratic parental leadership, the PTA must work to understand and dismantle the many barriers that stand in the way of widespread parental participation with the goal of strengthening the connection between home and school. One way to do this is through a concerted effort to bring about more accurate representation of the school community in the PTA. Ultimately, an integrated and democratic PTA has the potential to become a venue for families and educators to advocate for school-wide change at the district level and beyond.

**Overcoming Barriers to Involvement**

**Feeling welcoming.** To integrate the PTA, we must recognize and disrupt the many barriers to participation that parents face. One of the most pervasive barriers is that the PTA often does not feel welcoming to many parents. A Latina parent of a PreK student shared, “We are all one community, but it seems like you’re kind of divided where people feel more comfortable with their own people.” She explained that not only are there overarching cultural barriers between the white and Latino parent populations, but that she often did not feel welcomed by particular individuals at PTA meetings and events, “It may be their personality, or the age differences.” Ms. Johnson, the African American principal of the school for the last three years, underscored the need to make sure the PTA felt inviting to individual parents in the face of these cultural divides. She explained, “Fear plays a big role in everything, and I know at times it can be difficult to approach someone, if you don’t know them, you don’t know how they feel, about you, your culture, your world.” This apprehension can cause parents to be “standoffish until you feel welcomed.”

**Intentional outreach.** To make parents feel more welcomed, PTA members need to be intentional about reaching out to new people and expressing genuine interest in getting to know them. Jason, a white parent of a third grader and a first grader, reflected that “the friendship networks that we have are going to be with people that look like us, so you are going to have to be intentional, and you are going to have to step out away from your normal friendship network.” Simply defaulting to familiar faces and patterns will only exacerbate cultural divides. Yesenia, a Latina parent of a second grader, explained that instead the PTA needs to reach out and talk to new people and “ask them about their family, their kids, and what their hopes and dreams are for their kids.” Only through this authentic interest in building meaningful relationships will parents feel genuinely welcomed to the work of the PTA.

**Understanding cultural differences.** Furthermore, the PTA needs to institutionalize an understanding of the many different ways parents engage with their student’s success as a result of cultural differences. Principal Johnson pointed out the fundamental misunderstanding she has
witnessed in regard to parental involvement: “I’ve been around long enough to hear parents say about other parents, or teachers say about teachers, parents, and kids: ‘they don’t care.’ That’s never true. You care the way you know how.” Jason examined the ways in which white, middle-class families often harbor negative assumptions about the engagement of other parents: “I think that is a problem when white families come in and expect everyone to see it through their lens of values when people have other values and look at things differently.” He further explained, “Part of learning to work together with different races, you have to recognizes we are not going to see things the same way but we are going to have to work together.” One way to do this is through creating mechanisms to foster and reward many different types of parental contributions in the school. A Latina mother with three children in the school argued that the PTA should welcome parental involvement in many forms because “there’s not one way and there is not a right way. We have to really offer different options for everybody because of culture, language, and everybody is different in the way they think.”

Providing for language differences. Language differences also result in overwhelming barriers to participation for many parents. In a school with a large Spanish speaking population, PTA meetings and communication provided solely in English left many parents feeling completely disconnected from the process. A bilingual parent pointed out that it is crucial to provide interpretation at meetings and translation of all written documents because otherwise parents think, “It’s all in English, why am I gonna go? I am not going to be able to communicate; I am not going to be able to understand.” Beyond even a technical inability to participate, which is barrier enough, when PTA leaders do not make the effort to translate and interpret it sends a message that is damaging to any potential relationship with Spanish-speaking parents. Another parent explained, “There are also a lot of parents who are upset because they didn’t feel like they took me into account because it was in English.” Whole groups of parents feel ignored by these actions, a discouraging statement about how the PTA values their involvement.

To integrate the PTA and collectively challenge societal trends toward gentrification within the school, PTA leaders need to intentionally welcome families from different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, recognizing the limitations of white, middle-class definitions of parental involvement will open up the doors for contributions from more families. To do this, it is critical to offer all PTA activities and written communication in both English and Spanish.

Home and school connection

A common goal. To successfully strengthen the connections between home and school, PTA leaders and educators need to recognize the extent to which this is a goal that cuts across lines of race and class. Every parent who participated in this study—regardless of socioeconomic background—expressed a desire to better understand and support what their children experience at school every day. One mom shared that when PreK parents chatted in the hallways before and after school they asked each other, “Has your kid gotten comfortable coming to school? We have parents that still say ‘Oh no, I still struggle with my kid coming to school, to feel comfortable,’ and you wonder why.” Parents raised questions about academic rigor, lack of time to play and be creative, and concerns about bullying and other student behaviors as reasons why they worry about their child during the school day. She further explained that parents want to “speak to teachers on a regular basis to see what’s going on with
them, or what’s going on in their class … to make sure that our kids feel welcome that they feel comfortable.” She hoped that the PTA could provide a place for such communication, because “whenever we have our meetings we should talk about what’s going on in school.”

**Teacher outreach.** Teachers and parents agreed that schools need to feel more welcoming to parents to ensure the success of students. Mr. Lopez, a Latino second year teacher in the fourth and fifth grade dual-language classrooms explained, “Parental involvement for me is communication, with the parent and the teacher, the teacher and the student, not just the parent. This is a three-way triangle of everyone communicating and everyone being in the loop.” Ms. Lark, a multi-racial second year teacher in a first-grade classroom, argued that the burden is on teachers to forge connections with parents: “I think as teachers we just have to reach out more and just make them feel comfortable they will be more willing to help out.” Another parent agreed that many parents would be comforted by such outreach, because with her daughter’s teacher, “I want to be able, if she has any concerns, for her to be able to talk to me and for me if I have any concerns for me to be able to talk to her.” Parents invest tremendous trust in teachers and the school as they leave their children there day after day and want to be directly included in the educational process.

All parents play a huge role in what their children learn both inside and outside of school and can benefit from strong relationships with educators. To foster integration in the school rather that gentrification, the PTA needs to promote interconnectedness between teachers and parents inside and outside the classroom.

**Representation**

**Aligning the organization with the school.** To truly represent the needs of the whole school, the PTA leadership must reflect the diversity of the educational community. A white parent on the PTA Board reflected that typically “white parents are the ones that dominate the boards and the political efforts in PTAs. We can be very aggressive when it comes to education, even in schools where white parents are the minority.” He explained that this is dangerous because “what a white middle-class parent wants for the school is maybe not what the school needs.” To avoid imposing these values on the school, parents from diverse backgrounds need to work together on the PTA board to discuss and negotiate the goals and priorities of the organization.

**Recruitment of representative leadership.** Representative leadership not only allows for better alignment of the PTA agenda with the whole school community, but also helps recruit more parents to the organization overall. Rosa, one of the collaborative partners on this project, explained that when she took on a leadership role in the PTA, “My story would help bring in other people. I would say, it was my first year and I was one of those people that thought, what can I offer?” Alicia, a white parent of two students, was grateful for Rosa’s leadership because “she brings that kind of link and perspective, like, well, this is kind of how this group is feeling, they are afraid to speak up.” Alicia also commended Rosa for having the idea to plan the PTA’s first Tamale Cook Off, because she felt it was “the perfect example of paying respects to the culture and heritage that existed in the community before all these white people moved in.”
Intimidation by formalized leadership roles. That being said, the formality of PTA board positions can sometimes be intimidating to parents who have less experience with these roles. Despite having already planned a successful cultural event and fundraiser, Rosa still did not initially feel comfortable running for a board position: “I feel like I have never had that leadership. I always tell myself, I’m not a leader, I’m awesome at following directions, tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” Similarly, Julia shared, “My fear is not being able to help you, not being what you expected” even though she was asked to play a leadership role because of the very skills and ideas she had already contributed to the group. To diversify PTA leadership, these roles need to be demystified and support must be offered to parents as they gain comfort with new responsibilities.

While the PTA was founded by a group of white, middle-class, English speaking community members, many of whom did not even have children at the school, the board now more accurately represents the diversity of the community. With a board that more truly represents the whole school population, the PTA can prioritize the needs of the entire school and make more parents feel included in the process.

Outcomes

Collective Inquiry and Action

This PAR study functioned as a catalyst for collective inquiry and action within the PTA and allowed us to promote more democratic parental participation by minimizing the barriers to parental participation, fostering a stronger connection between home and school, and recruiting more representative leadership. Based on the findings the collaborative research team presented at the PTA Board Summer Retreat, the organization has made meaningful improvements to reach a broader base of the population.

Many of the key takeaways from the survey concerned the conditions parents need in place to be able to attend PTA meetings and events. From providing dinners and childcare, to making sure all PTA materials and events are fully bilingual, to working on an agenda that better reflects the real wants and needs of the community, the PTA has made big steps in welcoming and including all families. As a result, our PTA board is now more representative and we have a more diverse group of committee chairs, Room Parents, and volunteers. The base of the PTA membership has also been extended as communication has improved: most parents in the school are now following the PTA via our Facebook page, which regularly reports on school and community events.

In addition to making change regarding how the PTA operates within the school, survey findings also inspired the PTA Board to advocate for resources from the district. For example, many parents expressed concern with the fact that a high-needs school has to share a librarian with another campus. Principal Johnson explained that “it’s all based on numbers… we do need more people, not less of one person.” An integrated, democratic PTA can function as unified voice to advocate for resources from the district for the good of the entire school.

Similarly, most parents shared questions about the dual-language program, asking why English-speaking students and Spanish speaking students were segregated when most parents preferred “the students to be integrated and for the Spanish speakers to teach the English-speaking students, and vice versa.” This is another issue where a collective, diverse parent voice would make more of an impact than individual complaints. Through the collective inquiry of
this PAR project, the PTA is beginning to identify this and other areas where a representative and unified parent organization could advocate for resources and change on their campus that would have a positive impact for all students.

As one parent said, “the PTA can be a unifying force to bring about a sense of community for the school which is the best thing for the kids.” All parents care about forging a stronger connection between home and school, so the PTA needs to challenge barriers to parental participation and diversify its leadership. In the words of Julia, “we all have to row the same way for the boat to keep moving along. Once somebody starts going backwards we aren’t going to get anywhere.” Through the process of engaging in collective research for this PAR project, the PTA has identified and begun to act on projects and advocacy issues that will support the ongoing integration of this diverse community school.

An Ongoing Project

This PAR project represents not only a snapshot of the real work we as a PTA were already doing but also the transformational potential of participatory research (Freire, 2000). One fundamental way that our PTA has been transformed in the past year is that Rosa and Julia, my two primary PAR collaborators, went from new PTA moms to Board members. With the previous four years of PTA boards being all-white, all English-only speaking, and comprised of many “outside” community members without children in the school, it is significant and powerful that we now have a PTA board comprised only of parents with children in the school, half of whom are bilingual and two of whom attended the school themselves. In a generational majority Latino school, families feel more welcomed by a PTA leadership that better reflects the school’s population and an agenda that more closely mirrors the priorities of the community.

This is not to say that our work is done. A small group of relatively privileged parents still completes most PTA projects, typically in a last-minute and chaotic manner. We still struggle to host events that make all families, regardless of cultural background, feel welcome. We still strive to connect parents with teachers in meaningful, educationally beneficial ways. And many parents still share profound concerns about the quality of education that their children are receiving, for reasons both within the school’s control and imposed on it from the outside. Yet, we have made significant progress toward putting a more democratic framework in place in which families and educators can work together to make the school a place fully deserving of all the students and families who call it home.

Implications for Educational Leadership

Campus-based educational leaders are uniquely positioned to facilitate the process of building more democratic leadership in their schools, and preparation programs need to provide aspiring leaders with experiences that allow them to do so. The sustained practice I experienced working on this project has prepared me to engage in this work in other settings.

Democratic leadership for social transformation requires action and commitment to the process (Brown, 2010; Waite, 2010). Action research is one method for living this commitment to democracy through collective inquiry and discovery (Marcellino, 2012). We need to engage in dialogue and take action through deliberative democracy with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to collectively tackle problems in public schools (Mutchler, 2011). Parental involvement should not be limited to recruiting volunteers, but instead needs to engage families
in the messy work of participating in the functioning of the school (Mullen, 2010). University faculty should provide future educational leaders with concrete opportunities to connect theories of democratic leadership to their practice in the field (Brown, 2010).

As I complete my doctoral program and begin my tenure as a campus-level administrator, I hope to use this experience participating in PAR to make sure I remain a research-oriented leader who is “engaged in ongoing self-study in which they assess the needs of their schools, identify problem areas, and develop strategies for becoming more effective” (Glanz, 2005, p. 25). My experience working with my collaborative partners to complete this PAR project has provided me with a template for engaging in collective inquiry and building democratic school leadership in other educational communities.

Conclusion

There are not any shortcuts to integrating a diverse urban school and building democratic parental leadership: communities need to work together to make parents feel welcome and build relationships across cultural barriers. To rectify the disproportionate influence of white middle-class families, diverse leadership must be explicitly encouraged to recruit a more representative group of parents.

As a campus leader, I strive to realize the lessons we learned from this study: families want to participate in their children’s education, but they often do not feel welcomed or able. When PTAs and schools plan events that do not take busy working families’ schedules and needs into account, they should not be surprised when a narrow slice of the campus population shows up. Logistical barriers need to be counteracted to proactively welcome all families. Even more fundamentally, meeting and event agendas need to reflect parents’ real hopes and dreams for their children. Too often, PTAs and educators expect parents to fulfill a narrow definition of parental involvement revolving around white middle-class volunteerism, when parents themselves should be asked how they want to meaningfully participate in their children’s education and school.

With more democratic parental involvement and public support, neighborhood schools have the potential to become venues for combating segregation and gentrification. Public schools need unconditional funding rather than relying on individual privileged families to make improvements and market-based reforms. This project strives to bring families, educators, and community members together to support all students learning and growing in an urban public school, providing an example of collective integration despite societal trends toward inequality and segregation.

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