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Maria Martinez-Cosio and Rosario Martinez Iannacone

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The Tenuous Role of Institutional Agents

Parent Liaisons as Cultural Brokers

Maria Martinez-Cosio

University of Texas, Arlington

Rosario Martinez Iannacone

Claremont Graduate University and San Diego State University

This article reports on the contradictory role of parent involvement coordinators charged with increasing participation of low-income immigrant parents. This urban ethnographic study investigates the success of one program that engages Latino, Asian, and African American parents in the governance of their Southern California urban elementary school. It illustrates the dilemmas and tensions that arise as institutional agents serve as cultural brokers, as a bridge between the dominant culture and parents' diverse cultures while also serving as institutional agents. The authors use theories of social and cultural capital to examine the strategies used by a school-based cultural broker to provide bridging social capital to underserved agents seeking an equal role in policy making at their school. They provide examples of three tensions that block bridging social capital, including tension over resources, power sharing, and institutional decision making.

Keywords: *parent involvement; Latino immigrants; parent liaisons; cultural capital; cultural brokers*

School-parent liaisons play important roles as they negotiate their positions as advocates for parents, as promoters of school initiatives, and as cultural brokers. As an institutional agent (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan, 1999), the school-parent coordinator serves as an information bridge between schools and families. As a cultural broker, he or she may also act as an intermediary between the school and family, educating and helping each social system adapt to the other (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983). He or she may also help interpret the school's "culture of schooling" for parents who are unfamiliar with American education (Halford, 1996). Lopez and Stack (2001) describe the role of the cultural broker more fully:

[Cultural brokers are] creating a safe space in which to decode and translate the culture of power; enabling members of marginalized communities to rehearse the unfamiliar codes of the culture of power; serving as a means to deploy personal and collective social capital to gain access to networks of targeted mainstream-dominant institutions; and integrating and affirming community cultural values, resources and rights. (p. 48)

The school-parent liaison's role is divided into two, sometimes contradictory, ways. On one hand, as an institutional agent, the parent liaison supports and affirms the school's goals of educating parents on strategies for improving their children's academic achievement. On the other hand, the parent coordinator also serves as an advocate for parents unveiling the "subtle and not so subtle ways that formally meritocratic institutions help to recreate systems of social stratification" (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). This article focuses on the role of parent liaisons as they engage in these two seemingly opposing tasks.

Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Framework

The tensions created by parent coordinators as they work as parent advocates and institutional agents are examined through Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and its role in the reproduction of social inequality by schools (Bourdieu, 1977). This reproductive process occurs through the validation by schools of specific traits, tastes, and styles exhibited by students from elite status culture (DiMaggio, 1982). Parents who also exhibit compliance with institutional standards that legitimate elite status culture are able to obtain favorable educational outcomes for their children (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). But parents enter the educational sphere with skills, knowledge, and dispositions that vary according to race and class (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Upper class parents do not need a cultural broker to help them decipher the way schooling works. These parents, through their socialized acquisition of cultural capital, possess the knowledge to obtain scarce resources for their children, including accessing gifted student programs and obtaining tutors and other assistance that may help their struggling child succeed (Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

Parent liaisons, as advocates for low-income parents, can extend their knowledge of the dominant cultural norms, values, and beliefs that schools privilege to parents from underserved communities. Parent liaisons can assist parents from underserved communities to understand the workings of

the school bureaucracy, practice the effective use of language to obtain educational concessions, and, while educating parents about their rights, also advocate for change within the institution (Lin, 2001). But structures resist change as "public institutions [instead] demand that communities of color acquire cultural cues and knowledge of the culture of power" (Lopez & Stack, 2001, p. 49). Thus, parent liaisons' roles can be tenuous at best, as conflict arises from competing responsibilities: as school agents and tacit reproducers of inequality, and as partners with parents in exposing structural injustice and advocating for change.

The following study of the tenuous role of institutional agents is valuable in two ways. First, like studies by Stanton-Salazar (2000), Epstein (1986, 2001), and Delgado-Gaitan (1990, 1991, 1994), it contributes to the sociological and educational theoretical field by expanding our view of institutional agents beyond that of teacher or administrator. Second, it contributes to the field of parent involvement as this area garners attention from school reform advocates. In the current American education climate dominated by accountability and high-stakes testing, parent liaisons are increasingly important in connecting families of low-performing students, in particular those of English-language learners, to school reform efforts. As the pressure for school reform intensifies, the position of parent liaison is becoming more prevalent, professionalized, and in some cases, institutionalized. In 2003, New York City schools hired a parent coordinator for each of their 1,200 schools to support the district's urban reform initiative.¹ The San Diego Unified School District in California also hired parent liaisons for all of its lowest performing schools as it unrolled its literacy-based reform. Other school districts are developing job descriptions for these positions that require teaching credentials, classroom experience, and leadership skills.²

This article is divided into three sections. The first section provides definitions of cultural brokers and the challenges they face as bridges to institutions and other cultures. The second section presents an ethnographic description of the tensions and dilemmas faced by a Latina school-parent liaison in an urban Southern California school. The last section presents responses to mediating three key conflicts: tensions over resources, over power sharing, and over institutional decision making. We use the concepts of social and cultural capital as theoretical frameworks to understand the role of cultural knowledge, including tastes and practices, as it influences power and the identity of groups. This approach builds on the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Frow (1993), and Erickson (2001), who argue that cultural knowledge is most closely aligned with class preferences (Veenstra, 2005).

Ultimately, we argue that parent participation through the assistance of cultural brokers is essential for the health of a democratic public sphere. Habermas (1962) provides a framework for examining this issue as he describes the public sphere as a theater for deliberating and debating ideas (Fraser, 1993). The liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere limits participation to those with the cultural knowledge to discuss issues of "public concern" and hold the state accountable to the public (Habermas, 1962). Participation by parents has historically been a class-structured concept, and parent liaisons as cultural brokers can help parents from underserved communities enter the public sphere by exposing dominant cultural practices (Fraser, 1993; Habermas, 1962).

Method

This case draws from research conducted on immigrant participation in the redevelopment of their urban community. One of the sites observed for immigrant civic engagement was the UN Elementary parent room. UN Elementary is a K-5 school located in an urban community in Southern California that has one of the highest population densities in the region. Approximately 1,550 students attend UN Elementary, which was originally built for 900 students in 1997. All of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch and 75% are English-language learners (School District School Accountability Report Card [SARC]). Seventy-nine percent of students are Hispanic, 11% are Indochinese (Laotian, Hmong), 6% are African American, and 2% are White, non-Hispanic (SARC). The entire kindergarten class was moved to a nearby high school due to overcrowding at UN Elementary.

The first author spent 3 to 4 days a week in the parent room for 15 months. Thirteen Latino and two African American parents active in the parent room were interviewed by the first author. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours. Approximately 30 parents attend a monthly parents' meeting and the 15 chosen represent former leaders and those most currently active in the parent room. The low number of African American participants is indicative of the decline of the African American population in this community as a result of redevelopment. The community was also experiencing an influx of Latin American residents, mostly working-class immigrants from Mexico.

The second author is the parent room coordinator or liaison for UN Elementary since the school opened its doors in 1997. She has her master's

degree in social work and has 15 years' experience as a social worker in urban communities. She is Spanish/English bilingual and bicultural and was raised in the neighborhood surrounding UN Elementary. She lives a few blocks from the school with her young family and close to her extended family, who also have strong ties to this neighborhood.

All of the interviews were audiotaped by the first author. Twelve of the parent interviews were conducted in Spanish and were translated and transcribed by the first author. The analysis of this project was vetted through several parents, as well as the parent room coordinator. The analysis grew out of the interviews, extensive notes taken at every event, and after extensive interaction with parents. The parent coordinator and first author engaged in almost daily discussions about the dynamics of the parent room, the parent coordinator's philosophy of parent involvement, and the challenges she faced in running the parent room.

The Cultural Broker

Parent liaisons as cultural brokers are placed in an untenable position. As employees of the school district, parent liaisons are part of the schooling mechanism that maintains and reproduces inequality (Bourdieu, 1977). But as advocates for parents, in particular low-income immigrants, they are also charged with translating the academic culture and educating parents about their rights (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983). A young, White, middle-class parent liaison in a Southern California urban elementary school explains this tension:

And every time I tell [immigrant English-language-learning] parents, I . . . am nervous it's going to get back to the principal that I am actually telling [the parents], you know "this school is an API (Academic Performance Index) 1, out of 10. You know, of a possible score of 10, we are a 1." I wish there was a third party involved coming out and informing parents of what their rights were, you know. Because we have been told that we have got to be careful not to antagonize the parents against the administration, against our teachers. You know, as liaisons, that's not our job—to antagonize parents.

This parent liaison felt his job was in jeopardy if he fully informed parents from his school's largely immigrant population about the consequences of their children attending a low-performing school. In his position as an institutional agent, he is charged with supporting the school's goals to

retain its students and work with parents to improve their children's academic achievement. Yet, as an advocate for parents, he also feels a responsibility to inform parents of their rights to transfer their students to a higher performing school.

Historically, cultural brokers have existed in the United States since Europeans came in contact with Native Americans. These first cultural brokers included traders, missionaries, persons of mixed race, diplomats, advocates for Native Americans, teachers, scholars, ethnographers, linguists, and artists (Szasz, 1994). Children of immigrants also play the role of cultural border crossers, interpreting for their parents as they face dominant institutions (Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994). Straddling two or more cultures, the broker not only possesses communication skills in the dominant and other cultures but also models behavior for newcomers to successfully navigate the new culture in various settings (Boissevain, 1975).

Using Bourdieu's (1977) cultural capital framework, we analyze the process used by a parent liaison to expose parents to the knowledge, behaviors, and norms that schools value. She, in effect, works at making cultural capital, as "instruments of appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed," visible (p. 488). Through the exposure of the specific ways that culture is treated as a commodity, we seek to respond to an important gap in the literature concerning the ways dominant cultural capital is rewarded by schools and the role cultural brokers play in exposing these cultural, and ultimately economic, exchange processes (Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital identifies key elements in understanding the dynamics of the contradictions faced by the parent coordinator at UN Elementary. Knowledge is cultural capital that privileges the dominant class and which that class accumulates for its benefit. As our research shows, the parent coordinator is challenged to obtain and share valuable information with the parents at her school. Knowledge sharing in communities with English-language learners demands time to translate documents, building a base of knowledge on complex education issues, and time for parents to understand the effect on their children of grade-retention policies, bilingual education, and urban school reform measures.

Furthermore, the rules for parents to engage effectively with the school are not known to all participants. Similar to the "hidden curriculum" that exists in educational settings, there are unwritten rules and knowledge of political processes that remain out of reach for some racialized minority groups (see Hibbitt, Jones, & Meegan, 2001, on the exclusion of the underserved

population in urban redevelopment). Kelly (1999) defines the hidden curriculum as the implicit knowledge students acquire in school and that teachers and administrators unconsciously impart through everyday school routines (p. 8). Parents from underserved communities face a similar challenge in understanding how schools work. Teachers and school administrators may assume that their school governance structure is open and participatory processes are democratic and inclusive, when in practice they are not open and available to everyone who does not understand the implicit rules and possess culturally appropriate knowledge.

The parent liaison seeks to expose the participatory hidden curriculum while also educating the school's teachers and administrators of the contributions that parents' culture can make to their children's education (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). This approach presents a number of tensions and, at times, results in conflict and uncertainty. But to the UN Elementary parent coordinators, these tensions and conflict offer opportunities for two-way learning and growth.

Parent Coordinator as Cultural Broker

Historically, parent liaisons began as school volunteers, often stay-at-home mothers. These parents worked with teachers and school principals to disseminate information from the school to the home, led parent-teacher organizations (PTO), organized fundraisers such as bake sales, and assisted teachers with clerical work. These active parents developed their roles according to the needs of teachers and administrators. Parent liaisons were also evident in other fields such as health care, where liaisons worked with families facing catastrophic illnesses or as advocates for special education students. Some school-parent liaisons were eventually hired as part-time employees, as school districts faced the need for translators to serve a growing ethnically diverse student population (Moles, 1996). Title I funding helped cement the role of cultural brokers as paraprofessionals who could assist with English-language learners (Laye, 1995).

At the turn of the 21st century, the role of parent liaisons has become more institutionalized. The influence of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation introduced in 2002 by George W. Bush has been felt through the professionalization of this field. The NCLB provided resources to develop parent centers in Title I schools. But those charged with staffing these parent rooms are no longer the community aides who assisted with translation. Instead, parent liaisons are required to

(1) [help] their children to meet State and local standards; (2) obtain information about the range of programs, services, and resources available nationally and locally for parents and school personnel who work with parents; (3) help parents use the technology applied in their children's education; [and] (4) plan, implement, and fund activities for parents that coordinate the education of their children with other programs that serve their children and families. (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/pirc/index.html>)

The role of parent liaisons under an educational reform climate has thus shifted (Moles, 2000). Parent coordinators and school liaisons are not likely residents of the communities they serve but, instead, are institutional agents charged with educating parents about the intricacies of literacy training, higher order thinking, and standardized assessment tools.

The UN Elementary parent coordinator recognizes the changing role of the parent coordinator and supplements the school's and district's expectations with her own views of an effective family-school relationship. She states,

What we do within the parent room encompasses high expectations, [parents] developing their voice, creativity—meaning, how we are doing our work—mutual relationships, and a learning and teaching environment. [By that, I mean that] teachers are learning from parents and parents are learning from teachers. We recognize that everybody brings a contribution.

The parent liaison seeks to engage in bicultural network orientation (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), validating African American, Latino, Vietnamese, and Anglo parents' cultural resources while also decoding the culture of power (Lopez & Stack, 2001). Stanton-Salazar argues that this approach results in the most effective linkages to dominant institutions, as people from underserved communities are grounded and validated within their own culture while also acquiring knowledge about the dominant culture (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 25).

Negotiating the Liaison Role

The parent coordinator was hired at UN Elementary shortly after the school opened in 1997. The principal, and staff from a private foundation funding the parent coordinator position, envisioned parent involvement as engaging parents as volunteers, extending the classroom into the home. As the parent coordinator recalls, few parents came to the school's initial meetings:

Within the first 2 weeks of registration, I set up focus groups and found out why parents do not want to be involved in the school. Of the 50 parents . . . they voiced a need to have a role and place in school; they need good communication. This communication includes letters and flyers in different languages and staff that are able to speak those languages. They identified the need for English classes and other trainings so they may be able to help their children, such as computer classes. They wanted a school where parents were welcomed and someone says hello and acknowledges them. As parent coordinator, I understood that certain interventions were important in creating a school climate that supported parents, their culture and language.

The parent coordinator shared the results of the focus groups with the principal and other administrators, as well as the foundation staff. Two years later, additional money was made available to hire three part-time parent coordinators who were residents of the community and another two Latina residents as part-time office help. A Vietnamese man and an African American woman were hired to increase parent participation from those groups and organize cultural events at the school. A Latina parent liaison was hired to conduct outreach to parents of kindergarten students. In the 3rd year of the parent involvement program, the parent coordinator, who is a social worker (MSW), implemented a social workers' internship program, hiring two social work interns to more effectively assist parents and their families with a variety of needs. Now in its 10th year, the parent involvement program at UN Elementary provides a wide range of services, as the parent coordinator states:

The parent room was developed and is coordinated by social workers, parent coordinators, parents, and community residents. It is used in different ways according to the needs of parents. Some parents attend workshops or assist in planning programs. Other parents walk in to receive assistance with social services. Parents also utilize the parent room as a resource [for translation] or [to bring in] advocates when having conferences with teachers or administration.

After forming the language- and ethnicity-based parent groups, participation by parents grew rapidly. The Vietnamese parent group draws 25 to 40 parents to its monthly meetings conducted in Vietnamese. This parent group organizes an academic achievement recognition ceremony attended by more than 100 parents. It sponsors after-school Vietnamese language classes for grades three through five and conducts outreach to Chinese and Laotian families in the community. They successfully worked with the

school principal, with support from the parent room coordinator, to recruit and hire one of two Vietnamese teachers at the school.

Reflecting the approximately 80% student enrollment at UN Elementary, the Latino parent group is the most active. After initially focusing on recruitment, the Latino parents have shifted their attention to leadership development and increased participation in school committees that oversee bilingual education, school governance, and oversight of the school budget. The group's meetings draw from 25 to 40 parents and the leadership is made up primarily of women, including several who do not have children in the school but are residents of the area. Some non-Spanish-speaking women attend these meetings, including a grandmother of a student. Translation into English is provided. This simple dynamic of running the meetings in Spanish with English translation uncovers the power inherent in language; the English speakers often comment on the difficulties they face in trying to follow the translators' words while also paying attention to the speakers' mannerisms and the group's dynamics. It is one strategy the parent coordinator uses to uncover the power imbalance between the school and underserved families.

The African American parent group is the newest at UN Elementary and has struggled to retain members, as the African American population in this neighborhood continues to decline due to gentrification spurred by redevelopment (Martinez-Cosio, 2005). The parent liaison, a low-key African American mother of a kindergartner, has approached parents as they pick up their children from school, mailed out invitations, and worked to cultivate two parent leaders involved in youth sports. But her efforts failed to sustain a cohesive group of African American parents. One outspoken African American grandmother of a student continued to stay active, attending the monthly parent board meetings and participating in many of the activities organized by the Latino parent group.

In an effort to create cross-racial and cross-ethnic networks, the parent coordinator developed a parents' leadership board made up of leaders from each of the parent groups, as well as the social work interns and the three parent liaisons. An event that highlights the importance of the development of bridging ties between the parent ethnic/racial groups is an annual literacy night event. A team of parents, teachers, and UN Elementary administrators organizes a series of nine literacy nights every year that target the lowest performing K-5 students at the school. Parents, in particular the three parent groups, take an active role in recruiting families to attend, organizing language translation for each of the classrooms participating, and serving as hosts to families as they arrived for the evening's events.

Teachers at each grade level are paid a small stipend to conduct a workshop for parents on strategies to improve their children's literacy skills.

At the first literacy night, targeting students from kindergarten and first grade, more than 120 parents attended. A second literacy night was held for parents of second and third graders, and a third for fourth and fifth graders. The cycle was repeated twice, thus giving parents at least three opportunities to attend a literacy session. Approximately 600 parents and 800 children attended the nine literacy nights in 2002-2003. The event's success led parents to request grant money to add a series of math nights to supplement their literacy program for the next year. A math consultant was hired with a second school district grant and math literacy nights have been added.

The focus of the parent room in the past few years has switched to leadership development for parents. The parent coordinator uses a number of opportunities to allow parents to try out new skills necessary to operate in the "culture of power," including running meetings, public speaking, conducting research on issues pertinent to the community, role-playing scenarios in preparation for meeting with administrators, and guidance on strategies for negotiating for resources for their children. Two Latina parents have also enrolled in a leadership development program organized by a neighborhood nonprofit. Their acquisition of new skills, confidence in their new knowledge of how the system works, and willingness to work in partnership with school administrators have led to several significant successes.

One of the more important successes occurred in fiscal 2004-2005 when UN Elementary's School Site Council (SSC) approved money for language translation for parents attending key meetings. Parent leaders who served on the SSC played a key role in convincing teachers and administrators on the committee about the importance of these services for successful parent engagement. Parents, with the support of an interim principal, were also successful in obtaining funding for childcare during parent room and schoolwide meetings through the use of discretionary funds and a small amount under Title I funding. The parent coordinator and the three parent liaisons worked with parent leaders to decipher the bureaucracy to obtain the services parents sought.

But as the following examples illustrate, the gaining of new knowledge, skills, and confidence by parents to operate in the dominant cultural milieu is not always favorably received, often placing the parent coordinator in the middle as cultural broker, educator, mediator, and advocate.

The Tensions of a Parent Coordinator as Cultural Broker

There are a number of tensions that parent coordinators face, in particular those who also work as cultural brokers. They include tensions between the various stakeholders at the school: among parents, between parents and school staff, parents and administration, and parents and the school system. There are also tensions over resources, power sharing, and culture. The parent coordinator as cultural broker aims to bridge these disparate issues and mediate tensions while acknowledging that tensions are also opportunities for challenging existing processes and allowing for change and growth to occur.

We provide some examples of these tensions to illustrate the complexity of the issues and the tenuous role of the parent coordinator as she mediates these tensions.

Tension Over Resources

UN Elementary is committed to increasing parent participation, but the implementation of such a policy, in particular during lean economic years, is a contentious issue. The provision of translation services is an example of this tension. During the first 9 years, the parent coordinator and her parent liaisons provided language translation at small and large events whenever they were available. But parents noted the toll this type of work took on the parent coordinator and called for institutionalizing this service by the school. Parents also asked for institutionalizing child care services for all meetings and events at school. The service had been provided through a semi-volunteer arrangement made by the parent coordinator.

Until this year, the school argued that resources were scarce and sought more research on the potential use of these services. This tension over resources led to parents' frustration that major programmatic decisions are made without their full engagement from the onset. Teachers and administrators argued that they cannot always count on parents to consistently engage in meetings, workshops, and technical sessions as parents respond to their own social and economic situations.

The parent coordinator, using the parent room as a safe space where parents could decode and rehearse unfamiliar codes of the culture of power, helped parents learn how to read the school budget, their rights under Title I funding, and their role as members on governance committees, including the SSC. The leaders from the parent groups organized slates of candidates to fill their allotted seats on the governance committees and successfully swayed committee support for institutionalized translation and childcare as

budget priorities. Parents' acquisition of skills valuable in the dominant participatory sphere continues as they role-play lessons from Roberts' Rules of Order and acquire knowledge by interacting more closely with teachers and administrators on the governance committees.

This tension is far from being resolved, as the school principal, who was supportive of parents' efforts, left and her replacement has challenged these expenditures. Parents continue to maintain an active presence in the school governance committees, align allies within and from outside the school community, and work to protect the resources they sought to institutionalize within the school structure.

Conflict Over Power Sharing

This tension is primarily centered on defining the roles of stakeholders and the role of the cultural broker. Power-sharing tensions occur at every level of the school organization but are more evident between parents and teachers, as parents seek avenues for greater engagement. An example at UN Elementary involves a parent who came into the parent center complaining that her child's teacher does not allow her to volunteer in the classroom. The UN Elementary parent coordinator cites this example of an attempt at serving as a cultural and institutional broker, in this case between a teacher's conception of parent involvement and a Spanish-speaking parent's previous experiences as a school volunteer. Developing some congruency in definitions is an important part of her work. The parent coordinator explains,

The teacher identifies her classroom rules and volunteering is not needed. The parent is upset because the previous year she was helping the students read in small groups [in another classroom]. . . . The parent was hurt [at being rejected by this year's teacher] and thought about moving her daughter from the classroom. The parent spoke only Spanish and was hurt that the teacher, who was of the same ethnic background, would treat her disrespectfully. The teacher came to speak to [me] because she knew the parent and others were upset. She said she never had parents in the classroom and felt that it interrupted her class. She also was concerned with a parent observing her teach, which made her feel vulnerable at her worst times. I spoke with the teacher and informed her that the school had a strong parent volunteer program and parents have a history of being involved at this school. The teacher informed me that she had never had this experience at her other school. I tried to negotiate with the teacher to allow the parents to sign up and read a short story aloud to the class or a small group of children. I also suggested that the

teacher could develop a schedule that was conducive to her classroom and teaching style. Some parents were able to work within this teacher's rules. The parent that came to see me moved her child to another classroom. As a parent coordinator I found myself negotiating and trying to find solutions that met the needs of several major stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and students.

A key element in her work as a cultural broker is the parent liaison's ability to serve in a seemingly neutral role. Teachers see her as an effective resource in negotiating with parents, and parents see her as an advocate with unimpeachable credibility. She may not always be successful in mediating the issue to the extent that both sides are satisfied, as this last example illustrates, but she is able to educate stakeholders on the broader effect of their decisions.

The parent liaison also serves a critical role in managing power-sharing tensions between the new principal and active parent volunteers. The parent board and parents active in governance committees overwhelmed the new, young principal, who was an expert in curriculum development yet did not have any experience in working with parent volunteers. Parents were vocal about their needs and expectations and the new principal at first resisted acknowledgment of their role as partners in the governance structure. The parent liaison continues to be challenged to mediate between these two sides and the principal has slowly acquiesced to some parent engagement.

Tensions Over Institutional Decision Making

The UN Elementary parent coordinator states that holding the institution accountable and pointing out inequality in school interactions with parents is one of the more complicated tensions to manage. She adds,

A parent on the governance site committee came into the parent room to debrief an experience she had in a meeting. She said a month prior, the committee had voted that the agenda would be organized by the chair, administrator and a parent. This parent argued that this month's agenda had not included a parent in the planning process. The parent informed the committee chair, a teacher, that a parent must be present in those meetings. This parent member also stated that the agenda planning meetings are always at 7:15 a.m. when parents are getting their children to school. After discussing this problem with each parent member, it was discovered that the one parent appointed could not make that early time, but another parent could attend.

The parent coordinator arrived at a compromise by working with the parents, but there is still the need to raise awareness among the teachers and administrators of the importance of maintaining parent representation from the onset as partners in school governance. Sharing control of the direction of the school is a difficult process for some school personnel to embrace as they debate curriculum issues, personnel policies, school safety, and budget and finance issues with parents, issues that were once the prerogative of teachers and administrators (Easton et al., 1993; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990).

The UN Elementary parent coordinator sees these tensions over power sharing as opportunities. She argues that they are markers for parents and teachers for exploring change in their educational landscape. She works at making visible the ways that site-based management, participatory decision making, and greater attention to teacher professionalization collide with parents' knowledge and skills at effectively participating in school governance (Bauch & Goldring, 1998). But unlike Bourdieu's approach to legitimizing only the cultural resources of the dominant class, the UN parent liaison seeks to educate school staff to recognize the cultural resources parents also bring to the table. Rather than focusing on immigrant and low-income urban parents as disadvantaged, she "seeks to highlight the cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged" (Yosso, 2005, p. 69).

Analysis and Discussion

Parents in underserved communities such as the one surrounding UN Elementary have cultural resources that are valuable outside of school. Immigrant parents use their networks of friends and family for food, shelter, childcare, and job referrals (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2002; Moll et al., 1992; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). This form of capital is not always valued within the school or other formal institutions. The potential contained within these cultural resources is effectively used by the UN Elementary parent coordinator and, at the same time, serves as a bridge for sharing dominant cultural capital with parents.

Acknowledging the importance of culture in parent involvement is one of several challenges the parent coordinator faces as she develops this identity as an institutional bridge. Her efforts at validating the cultural resources of the UN Elementary parents by enhancing their motivational dispositions and providing access to dominant cultural knowledge are at times ignored by school administrators, criticized when English-language-learning parents

take action to counter school proposals, and applauded when the parents' actions support school and foundation initiatives. She engages parents' culture through the ethnic- and language-based parent groups, financial support of each group's cultural activities including parents' presentations on Mexican history, supporting parents' efforts at instituting Vietnamese language courses for students after school, and acknowledging parents' cultures as significant and valuable for their children's academic success (Yosso, 2005).

The contradictions become visible when she calls for additional resources to challenge cultural practices that privilege the dominant culture. These resources are not only financial but involve staff time, culturally appropriate approaches, and timelines that allow parents to develop a comprehensive understanding of complicated issues. Her approach runs counter to strategies focused on efficiency. The role of culture as a mediating tool in actively engaging parents to address academic achievement is ignored, as expediency and institutional prerogatives take precedence.

The parent room, as a site for these interactions, is a space that acknowledges the importance of relationship building and trust through the use of culture, but it is also a safe site to practice the social and cultural skills needed to navigate in the dominant cultural sphere (Lopez & Stack, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). As a cultural broker and an institutional agent, the parent coordinator works to achieve balance between these two roles while maintaining flexibility in response to parents' needs. These are critical elements for the success of programs that aim to improve the lives of the urban poor, according to Harvard social analyst Lisbeth Schorr (1989):

The programs that succeed in helping children in the shadows are intensive, comprehensive and flexible. They also share an extra dimension, more difficult to capture: their climate is created by skilled, committed professionals who establish respectful and trusting relationships and respond to the individual needs of those they serve. The nature of their services, the terms on which they are offered, the relationships with families, the essence of the programs themselves—all take their shape from the needs of those they serve, rather than from the precepts, demands, and boundaries set by professionalism and bureaucracies. (p. 259)

The goal of the parent coordinator as cultural broker is to make visible and facilitate the acquisition of the cultural cues and skills needed to help parents engage as partners with the school in their children's education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The parent coordinator helps parents navigate a field of interaction that is inherently conflictual, as the social conditions

of that field shape cultural production (Swartz, 1997). UN Elementary is a field of interaction that is reflective of a broader field that encompasses U.S. education. Fields, according to Bourdieu, are sites of resistance as well as domination. The parent liaison as an institutional agent is complicit in domination but seeks to foster resistance by serving as a cultural bridge for parents. Yet, as an institutional agent, the liaison occupies a privileged position because of his or her skills and knowledge and is expected to carry out the rules and procedures of the institution. As Lin (2001) states, there is an institutional "reliance on their ability and willingness to interpret 'properly' and act effectively and creatively" (p. 34).

Ultimately, fields are contested sites where the struggle focuses on legitimation (Bourdieu, 1977; Swartz, 1997). The new principal at UN Elementary was particularly illustrative of this focus as she sought to maintain control of school funding and governance despite parents' previous efforts to gain legitimacy through the school governance committees. The parent liaison sought to legitimize parents' cultural resources by educating school staff but also sought to inculcate dominant cultural resources on parents from underserved communities by making skills, knowledge, and information visible and available.

Conclusion

The role of parent coordinators as cultural brokers while also serving as institutional agents is one fraught with conflict and tension. But it is also a tenuous role that allows for flexibility and the creation of more responsive models for engaging "hard to reach" parents. Although there are no easy answers that we can offer for those engaged in this type of work, we do see many opportunities for meaningful engagement of parents through the parent-coordinator/cultural broker approach.

The institutionalization of the parent-coordinator role is one area that demands greater attention. School administrators argue that professionalizing this position results in greater consistency between school sites, improvements in extending the work of the school into the home, and more professional development. The UN Elementary parent room coordinator argues that the skills required of an effective parent coordinator are not necessarily those acquired through professional development. In fact, we would argue that the opposite is true. We contend that parent liaisons who are identified by their communities as effective cultural brokers have deep knowledge of the communities with which they work, a commitment to

advocating for the underserved, political skills, and experience in resolving difficult issues. These qualifications must be balanced with the advanced education that such a role is increasingly demanding.

A key element in the success of the UN Elementary parent coordinator is her approach to developing parent programs and leadership as an organic process that originates with the parents. But equally important is her goal to develop trusting relationships between parents, teachers, and administrators. The tensions that arise in meeting the needs of these diverse stakeholders are used by the parent coordinator as opportunities for learning where the pressure points lie, what conditions led to the tension, and what its underlying causes are. This approach leads to increased dialogue between parents and the administration, rather than division and strife.

The role of the cultural broker and institutional agent provides a window into the effectiveness of culturally based approaches to parent engagement that can also serve other arenas and populations. By exposing the subtle ways that formally meritocratic institutions exclude particular groups of people from participatory processes, parent coordinators remind us of our role in supporting democratic practices that allow the underserved to participate as equal partners and not as social service clients. Habermas presents a cogent analysis of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere as being "open and accessible to all" (Fraser, 1993, p. 9). Yet, social inequalities present formidable obstacles to participation and engagement by the underserved. Parent liaisons as cultural bridges will always be in the middle, struggling to share privileged knowledge with parents while resisting those who see them as creators of problems and instigators. The recognition of these tensions and conflicts is an important first step in understanding the on-the-ground dynamics of the reproduction of inequality in our schools.

Notes

1. New York City schools hired 1,200 parent coordinators and liaisons in August 2003 (Gootman, 2003). The San Diego Unified School District in California hired 10 parent liaisons in 2000 to work with its lowest performing (focus) schools. The number of liaisons was increased to 28 in 2004.

2. An example of responsibilities as listed in a job announcement include the following:

- Conduct home visits to parents of English-language-learning students with high absentee rates.
- Act as an interpreter for families during parent-teacher visits.
- Translate written information when appropriate.
- Provide families with translated information explaining the American school system and the importance of attending classes.

- Conduct general family assessments and identify needs.
- Refer families to outside service providers in the city as needed.
- Participate in program meetings with collaborating agencies and community forums.
- Assist and support staff in the identification and review of resource materials and development/adaptation of culturally and linguistically appropriate informational and educational materials for the Latino communities, as needed.

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Maria Martinez-Cosio is an assistant professor at the University of Texas, Arlington. Her research interests include immigrant parent involvement in education, gentrification, and immigrant involvement in urban renewal efforts. She is currently working on an NSF-funded project with two colleagues from the University of Texas, Arlington, on the role of schools in the adjustment of teenagers relocated to the Dallas-Forth Worth area as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

Rosario Martinez Iannacone is currently working on her PhD in education from San Diego State University and Claremont Graduate University. She has a master's degree in social work from San Diego State University. Her research interests include pre-K-12 parent involvement in urban areas with diverse populations and the role of parent centers and social workers within a school setting. She is currently working as an assistant director of community school programs for three K-12 schools in southern California.