

INTRODUCTION

Jade is a documentary filmmaker. In recent years, she has begun working with school districts and teachers to support the educational use of documentary films in the classroom.¹ As a workshop trainer, she often finds herself in the reception area of schools—a busy hub of activity where the phone rings, overhead announcements are made, teachers come to collect their mail or messages, and students walk into and out of a principal’s office. She recalls the very first time she visited a school to give a workshop. She entered the main office, where the receptionist was currently occupied. Jade stood by a counter as the receptionist moved about the room organizing paperwork. After a few minutes and without any eye contact or greeting from the receptionist, Jade noticed a sign-in sheet and promptly signed herself in to follow what she gathered might have been the formal procedure for the reception area. To her dismay, she stood waiting for another five minutes for a response or reception, after which point she finally interrupted the receptionist for her attention. Indeed, it was now almost time for her workshop. Upon introducing herself and the nature of her visit to the receptionist after this period of idle waiting, the receptionist quickly excused the delayed response by saying, “I’m sorry, I thought you were a parent.”

Jade’s story is not unusual. Across the country, stories speak to the fractured or distant relationship between schools and communities. In Jade’s example, we see a school that has become accustomed to brushing parents aside and turning instead to the “real” business of running schools—keeping schedules, filing the proper paperwork, submitting grades—in effect, managing the bureaucracy of schools. In this environment, a parent’s interaction with the school is minimal, likely reduced to the daily rituals of dropping off and picking up children in the schoolyard. When parents are discouraged (or, in some cases, barred)

from entering main offices or front hallways, this often indicates a broader school culture that keeps parents and families at a distance that feels safe and comfortable to school staff and administrators.

Then there are schools like McAuliffe Elementary School on Chicago's Northwest Side. *Sophia* is a mother of two children who attend the school. When her son first started school, her encounters with McAuliffe were limited to dropping him off and picking him up each day. She was not familiar with the school, and other mothers told her stories of negative encounters with school staff. The general sentiment was that parents were not welcome inside the school. As a result, Sophia never spent time inside her son's school. However, over time, through the arrival of a new principal and the development of new school-based programs and activities for parents, the climate has changed. She describes a main office where the receptionists often know the parents by name, where the principal's door is almost always open, and where parents move freely in and out as they go about their activities in the school. In fact, when I first visited McAuliffe one afternoon, I was greeted by a woman working in the main office. To see if she could assist me, I asked if she was the school receptionist, to which she replied, "No, I'm a parent, but I'm pretty sure I can help you. What do you need?"

Stories like these speak to the wide variety in how relationships between schools and families are negotiated. The experiences of parents and community members like Jade and Sophia capture the necessity in creating a movement for change in schools and communities, particularly in low-income communities of color, where issues of race, class, culture, and power influence the dynamics between families and schools. How do we begin to mend the relationship between schools and families? By examining the experiences of parents like Sophia—how they navigate the institution of school, manage relationships with school staff, and define their experiences in schools—we can better understand how schools and communities must change to become places that work productively and in partnership with parents. But the experiences of Jade and Sophia underscore the persistent pattern of distrust and distance that frames the interactions between many schools and families.

In my own early years as a teacher in a diverse, urban school, while I felt increasingly confident in my abilities to develop curriculum and manage classrooms, I felt inadequately prepared to interact with families. I had an overwhelming impulse to reach out to families in the traditional ways I had experienced and seen growing up in U.S. schools—through open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and classroom volunteers. These strategies turned up a few wonderful parents who would support me in and out of the classroom—preparing materials for the next day, displaying student work in the classroom, and helping to coordinate and plan local field trips. But I wondered about the rest of the parents—those who spoke languages other than English, those who never returned my calls, those who were seldom present in the school. My own inability to think outside the box when reaching parents surprised and concerned me. Even as a novice classroom teacher, I could see that to reach my students successfully in the classroom and to build their success as individual learners, I had to make connections that were more meaningful to their lives outside my classroom. It mattered when *Terry's* family became homeless, when *Mark's* father struggled with alcoholism, when my students came to school hungry, and when parents had not completed high school. Indeed, it was my responsibility to find better ways to interact with parents. I began including my students in my conferences with their parents and using the conversation as an opportunity to hear and listen rather than to tell and report. I visited their homes if parents could not come to the school, went to libraries and churches in the community with my students and their families, and included their family narratives and experiences in our classroom learning. Over the years, as I built relationships with families and came to understand their experiences, I added to and revised my repertoire of strategies to engage families.

Admittedly, my strategies and ideas were not perfect, and over the course of different teaching assignments, my years as a graduate student and researcher, and now as a parent, these ideas have evolved. During my years as a teacher, I sought the ideas and wisdom of those around me within the school—fellow teachers, a guidance counselor, a librarian, a social worker, the principal. Through these conversations,

I learned the most from individuals who had personal connections to the community. From *May*, a white teacher who lived in the school's neighborhood; *Jean*, an African American librarian who was closely connected to many of the families of color within the school; and *Amelia*, the Latina social worker who visited the homes of Spanish-speaking families who were struggling with family and school issues, I learned immensely about the importance of meaningful ties to families and the broader community.² For the vast majority of teachers, however, these meaningful ties did not exist, and it often left me wondering what schools were to do when they were not equipped with the resources to reach out to families.

This book is founded on that premise—that schools have much to learn about the families and communities they serve and that they stand to gain clarity and greater understanding from those individuals and groups that are closely connected to the lives and experiences of those communities. This book is the story of one community's quest to change the very nature of relationships between families and schools. In the midst of a school reform era that seeks to make drastic changes, build new schools, rebuild failing ones, and radically turn around existing practices, this book is a call to action for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers alike—to recast a new vision for parent and community engagement in schools. In response to the strong pull of tradition and the vital need for community expertise, I chose to explore the role of one community organizing group, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), and its efforts to identify new ways to engage families and schools.

WHY COMMUNITY ORGANIZING?

For the schools and teachers that, like me, have struggled to move beyond the more traditional school-family relationship, community organizing groups can offer compelling narratives for school and community transformation. By their very nature, community organizing efforts seek to build a constituency of individuals who develop common goals in demanding change, holding institutions or officials

accountable. These efforts seek to put an end to long histories of problematic practices that have become institutionalized. The persistent inequality in urban schools and the lack of shared power and authority among families and schools demand a school-reform approach that will seek to radically transform the nature of relationships between schools and communities. While many parents may struggle individually when facing issues with schools, through community organizing, they can be connected to other parents with similar experiences and band together to make their voices heard.

The confrontational side of community organizing is certainly the more familiar image to most. While these tactics can be useful in demanding the kinds of changes desired, a mere emphasis on these popularized images—sit-ins, rallies, public protests—fails to realize an equally important aspect of community organizing. These public displays are often acts of resistance to the oppressive nature of institutions and individuals that perpetuate inequality in cities and towns across the country. And while the public eye may often only see the glossy pictures of conflict and confrontation shared across media outlets, the careful and patient work of relationship building and leadership development often forms the basis for any campaign. Understanding both dimensions of community organizing—relationships and power—will be fundamental to realizing the contributions of the field as it undergoes recent growth. Estimates from 2009 project that over five hundred organizing groups are working on public education issues in urban areas alone.³

The expert attention to relationship building and power will be especially valuable to challenges in building parent and community engagement. While schools may be limited in their understanding of family and community experiences, community organizing groups are intimately connected to the individuals and groups they work with. Staffed by organizers who may have shared language, cultures, and experiences with the community, organizing groups are well equipped to communicate with parents and develop a clear sense of parents' perspectives and the situations that affect families. By working on broad-based community issues such as affordable housing, immigration reform, health care, and safety, these groups bring a much-needed holistic view to educational issues. As one parent organizer in Chicago put it, "Life

doesn't happen in these neat arrangements and categories. Whether I have a job, fear being evicted from my home, feel unsafe on my street—that will shape how my child shows up at school.”

THE LOGAN SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Through an exploration of community organizing efforts that build parent participation and leadership, this book seeks to address the challenges schools face in building family engagement. By examining a successful case, we can begin to identify the processes that may be fundamental to building effective forms of parent engagement.

When I first came upon the work of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA), I was struck by the organization's ability to do what seemed impossible in other places. In schools that had struggled to meet the needs of immigrant, low-income students who often were not fluent in English, parents had begun to become forceful advocates for much-needed changes. In communities that had struggled with animosity, distrust, and misunderstanding between families and schools, parents were working together with school staff to identify common goals and support students. In those communities that would be commonly labeled as hard to reach, parents were present at school functions, worked alongside teachers in classrooms, and were tutoring students in the hallway. What could we learn from this organizing group? Could an exploration of its practices lead us toward some fresh new understanding about parent engagement?

This is precisely the question that this book seeks to answer. This book presents a rare, in-depth account of LSNA's success as an exemplary model in driving educational change at the community and state levels.⁴ Based in Chicago's Northwest Side community of Logan Square, LSNA has, for almost two decades, been involved in building parent participation and leadership in local schools. At the core of its work in schools is the Parent Mentor program. Started in 1995, the program has trained over thirteen hundred parents across eight schools to work in classrooms with teachers and to support student learning.

Every parent mentor devotes more than one hundred hours each year to a teacher's classroom, building connections with teachers and students. Using a model for leadership development, the program serves as a first step for parent participation in schools and for long-term engagement as parent leaders. From this, LSNA created five school-based community learning centers that offer programming for adults (e.g., General Educational Development [GED] and English as a second language [ESL] classes) and children (homework support, folk dancing, and book clubs) after school four days each week. The community centers are staffed and coordinated by parent leaders. Parents have also gone on to work in the AmeriCorps-sponsored Parent Tutor program, where parents work individually with students who need additional academic support. And parents who develop an interest and passion for teaching can enroll in a bilingual teaching degree program organized by LSNA. The Grow Your Own Teachers program was the model for a statewide initiative that has launched similar programs across Illinois. Fifty-six LSNA parents are enrolled in this degree program, and five candidates have already become teachers. These remarkable accomplishments have served as the basis for local and state initiatives. LSNA's work has generated national discussions on community organizing for school reform, helped launch a community schools initiative in Chicago, and been the subject of numerous research projects and reports.⁵

In fact, within Chicago and across the country, other school and community groups have sought out LSNA's education work, in particular, its Parent Mentor program, as a potential model. Various cities and towns that struggle to engage families in schools and seek to explore nontraditional strategies for developing parent participation have looked toward LSNA's example. While many education organizing efforts and campaigns promote broad-based policy changes at the state or district level, LSNA's work with parents seeks to change the culture of individual schools and classrooms. Changes in school culture are some of the most challenging to promote, because they require a change in beliefs and attitudes of individuals and often require the slow and patient work of building trust, relationships, and understanding. LSNA's work offers rare insight into these home-and-school relationships and

offers solutions to communities beyond Chicago that also struggle with similar issues.

A LAYERED ETHNOGRAPHY

In its work with parents, LSNA underscores the importance of process. How do parents enter their relationships with schools? And how do they work within schools and together with school staff to create the necessary changes in home-and-school relationships? Through the yearlong Parent Mentor program, parents are given the opportunity to understand schools more clearly and to develop new and evolving ways of participating in schools. Through this experience, schools themselves—their staff and culture—can adapt and change as parents redefine their relationship with schools.

This process of change that was prompted by the Parent Mentor program became central to my study. To understand the experiences, beliefs, and narratives that drive this change, I structured the study as a multiyear ethnography. Over four years, I developed relationships with parents, community organizers, and school staff in the Logan Square neighborhood—interviewing parents, attending training sessions and leadership workshops, visiting classrooms, meeting with organizers, and walking the school hallways with parent mentors. Because the Parent Mentor program often serves as a first step for many parents who later become involved in other school and community campaigns, I also explored LSNA's many related programs and activities, such as the community learning centers, the Literacy Ambassadors program, and the statewide Grow Your Own Teachers program.

In addition to this broad view of LSNA's work across various schools and across the community, I chose one school and its group of parent mentors as a focal point of the study. This allowed me to explore the experiences of one group of parents as they began their involvement in schools, became connected to others in the school community, and understood the impact of their participation. Because parents often reflected on their personal and familial journeys and experiences throughout participation in the program, I designed this aspect of the

study with more care and attention to the relationships I would build with parents. From this group of parents, I chose four newly involved parent mentors whom I would follow more closely throughout the year. I interviewed these parents regularly throughout their first year of the program, observed them in their classrooms as parent mentors throughout the year, informally met with them and their families, and observed them as they participated in training sessions, workshops, and meetings. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in the book come from interviews I conducted with these and other parents, with teachers, and with other people in the community between May 2006 and May 2010.

These multiple layers of analysis and inquiry provided a complex and rich portrait of parent participation as I began to view and understand parents' motivations, personal narratives, hopes, and goals in their journey toward parent engagement. In joining traditional ethnography and portraiture, I wanted to design a methodology that would bring attention to the relationships within the field, acknowledge my evolving relationship with participants in the study, and reflect the distinct layers of analysis. I have called this hybrid methodology *layered ethnography*. A more detailed explanation of this methodology can be found in the appendix, "A Layered Ethnography: At the Crossroads of Relationship, Theory, and Methodology."

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 explores the interactions between families and schools. By blending the work of scholars with the realities facing practitioners, I present the shortcomings of a more traditional model of parent involvement that we might normally see in schools. Then, I present an ecological perspective on parent engagement—a perspective shaped by the undeniable reality that schools are fundamentally shaped by families and communities. In chapter 2, we explore the narrative of LSNA and how and why the organization came to its ultimate interest in the intersection between school and community life. Through the perspectives of community organizers and parents, we also track the creation

of the Parent Mentor program and the evolution of education organizing. The real-life experiences and narratives of parents are the foundation of this story. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth portrait of a group of parents who take us on a journey—to help us understand their motivations, experiences, and perspectives in the Parent Mentor program. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 examine the three key processes that will move us from a traditional to an ecological conception of parent engagement. In chapter 4, I recommend moving beyond the notion that parent engagement practices should be school centered or family centered, arguing instead for mutually engaging practices. Chapter 5 identifies the importance of relationship building, and chapter 6 discusses how schools can share power and leadership with parents. The conclusion finds that when schools and communities aim for the goals described in chapters 4, 5, and 6—mutual engagement, relationship building, and shared leadership and power—they can move toward an ecological conception of parent engagement and can transform schools, families, and communities. Finally, an appendix explains the methodology of research that I conducted for this book. I explore the theories of relationships that shape the design of this study and examine the central role that identity, relationships, and trust played in the research process.

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