
The role of identity narratives in overcoming barriers to parental engagement

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Abstract: This paper describes a qualitative study conducted over the course of one school year in an ethnically diverse school. Aimed at exploring the conditions under which parents of low socioeconomic status (SES) immigrant-background children will engage actively with the school, we involved parents and facilitators in story-telling sessions, sharing personal experiences and reading and writing stories about identity and diversity. An interactional space for these exchanges was created within the school where parents' linguistic and cultural talents were valued. We conclude, on the basis of interviews and group discussions with parents, that parental engagement will be productive in supporting student achievement only when their relationships with educators in the school are identity-affirming.

Keywords: parental engagement, immigrants, identity texts, socio-economic status

Introduction

Existing research has demonstrated the importance of parental engagement for student achievement (e.g. Carreón, Drake & Barton, 2005; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Most studies discussing the role of parental engagement focus on recruiting and retaining parents as active participants in the school and wider community and examine the impact of different levels of involvement on students' academic performance (Goodall, 2012; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans & Efreom, 2005). However, while such studies have reported some success with various interventions, there is general agreement that schools with a low SES student population face more challenges in

engaging parents in comparison to higher-income, English-speaking parents. Reasons that include lack of English proficiency of parents, lack of comparable leisure time between low-income and higher-income parents and unfamiliarity with the expectations and culture of Canadian school systems, may come across as apathy. Further, the literature tends not to distinguish between involvement and engagement. We use “engagement” to mean an emotional involvement or commitment and argue that participation and involvement, while important, merely set the stage for effective engagement.

This collaborative study involving immigrant parents, elementary school teachers, and university researchers established an interpersonal space that explored parents’ perceptions of their roles in their children’s education. Participants shared life experiences by writing stories both in home languages and English. Parents’ bilingual stories were also shared with students as models for encouragement in thinking about their own life experiences growing up in multicultural contexts.

The research employed narrative strategies elaborated by Ada and Campoy (2004), enabling parents and teachers to share aspects of their evolving identities. The outcomes of this process of infusing identity into various forms of cultural production are called *identity texts*:

Identity texts described the products of students’ creative work or performances carried out within the pedagogical space orchestrated by the classroom teacher. Students invest their identities in the creation of these texts which can be written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light.
(p. 3)

Within the framework elaborated by Cummins and Early (2011) the relevance of identity text work carried out by students or parents from socially marginalized communities is that the affirmation of identity integral to the creation of identity texts challenges the devaluation of identity frequently experienced in the wider society. Several studies (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Ogbu, 1978; 1992; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) have pointed to the centrality of societal power relations in explaining patterns of minority group (under) achievement. Groups that experience long-term educational underachievement tend to have experienced

discrimination and exclusion from the dominant societal group over generations (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 485; Bishop & Berryman, 2006). Similar perceptions are common among educators in some contexts with respect to more recent immigrant communities. (Oller, 2014). Moreover, these deficit orientations tend to become self-fulfilling causing educators to adopt a fatalistic perspective (Bishop & Berryman, 2006 p. 261).

Notwithstanding these seemingly pessimistic views, evidence exists that schools *can* make a significant difference in students' academic prospects by implementing culturally responsive instruction that mobilizes community funds of knowledge (Rodriguez, 2013; Sleeter, 2011). A central element of effective programs that reverse patterns of underachievement is that educators challenge the devaluation of student and community identities in the interactions orchestrated with students from marginalized group communities.

The present study extends this analysis to the sphere of parental engagement. When schools adopt an implicit or explicit deficit orientation in relation to low-income immigrant communities, educators are unlikely to see collaboration between parents and educators as valuable. Similarly, parents will refuse to participate in a relationship that locates them in an inferior status. However, educators can challenge this deficit orientation by attempting to mobilize the funds of knowledge in immigrant families and communities. Our study set out to explore the conditions under which educator-parent interaction could become identity-affirming for parents, thereby reinforcing and sustaining further engagement with the school and their children's education.

Review of literature on parental engagement

Studies that offer critical perspectives on the importance of parental engagement within North American schools reveal that some of the challenges that parents encounter occur (a) in generalized terms, (b) as English L1 low-income families and (c) as English language learners (ELLs), while trying to integrate into society as immigrants and "long-term newcomers" (Carreón, Drake & Barton, 2005; Eisner & Meidert, 2011; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Pelletier & Brent, 2002; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). These studies distinguish and highlight systemic barriers and discuss implications for schools, providing suggestions for overcoming these barriers.

While the studies focused on strategies such as recruitment, participation and retention of parents in both formal and informal

ways, the terms “involvement” and “engagement” seem to have been used interchangeably. The interpretation of parental engagement “which includes learning at home, school-home and home-school communication, in-school activities, decision-making (e.g. being a parent governor) and collaborating with the community” (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011) emerged from many of the studies. Further, “engagement” was described as including: learning at home; communication; in-school activities; participating as a member of an audience; decision making and collaborating with the community (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011, p.16). Therefore, while the studies support the idea that the main barriers to engagement from the parents’ perspective appear to include costs, time, transportation, language, low levels of literacy and numeracy, lack of confidence in supporting children’s learning or engaging with a school, the problem may lie within the ambiguity of the use of the word engagement itself.

Parental involvement was also found to be largely dependent on factors such as family-related obligations, organization, time management, the strength of neighborhood support networks and the content of the programme itself (Eisner & Meidert, 2011). Further, there are several benefits of parental engagement including increased emotional capital and better retention rates. Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) prioritized the identification of successful interventions supported by evidence in three categories: “School-home links, support and training for parents [and] family and community-based interventions” (p. 6). Goodall (2012) also highlighted six central components to student success: authoritative parenting; early engagement; proactive interest; ongoing interest; maintaining high educational aspirations, and remaining engaged in the child’s academic life.

Further, research has underscored a need to prepare pre-service teachers to involve parents, for effective professional development programs to enable schools to pursue this goal, as well as to examine the importance of social variables in yielding positive student outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed, 2002). Research into obstacles to parental engagement has also focused on psychological barriers which include variability in parental characteristics, parental competence and level of parental involvement, parent demographics, attitudes about education, and community engagement behaviors as well as parents’ perceptions of school receptivity (Mendez, Carpenter, La Forett, & Cohen, 2009). Moreover, there are other predictors such as actual school

receptivity, parental educational aspirations for the child, community engagement behaviors and parents' level of employment (Overstreet, Devine, Bevans & Efreom, 2005).

The relationship between parental engagement and student achievement remains a constant theme in discussion about access, retention and success. Socio-economic barriers facing parents in supporting their children's learning play a major role in preventing parents from participating in schooling (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Another major challenge centers on issues in school communities with native English speakers; for example, minority communities such as the African American and Latino communities (Jeynes, 2010; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans & Efreom, 2005; Plunkett, Behnke, Sands & Choi, 2009). The studies indicated that there are deliberate actions that teachers can take to enhance parental involvement. Educating and assisting parents to understand the school system as well as training staff to demonstrate respect for the families' ways of knowing were highlighted as effective strategies.

The nature of parental engagement and related barriers with specific reference to immigrant families and non-native English speakers has been well-researched (e.g., Carreón, Drake & Barton, 2005; Hélot & Young, 2006; Schechter, 2009). For instance, the importance of recruiting ELL parents as partners in education to extend school success to the home (Panferov, 2010) and the need to emphasize the significant academic benefits for ELLs when parents monitor students' progress, provide educational advice, and assist with schoolwork (Plunkett, Behnke, Sands & Choi, 2009) have been highlighted as salient factors.

Schechter (2009) explored the perceptions of three elementary school teachers who were highly engaged in a parental involvement initiative in the Greater Toronto Area involving weekly meetings between parents and teachers regarding the effects of these meetings and the conditions under which newcomer parents will engage actively with the school. There was consensus among the teachers regarding five major effects of the parent involvement program: more awareness of the Ontario educational system; open lines of communication between the school and immigrant families; community building between parents and teachers; strengthening the view of diversity as a resource and generating confidence among parents to act as advocates for their children's educational success.

Further insight into the conditions under which parents will

engage actively with the school is offered by the “Didenheim School Project” conducted in the Alsace region of France (Hélot & Young, 2006). Initiated by teachers in a highly multilingual community, the objectives of the project were to bring students into contact with other languages and cultures through the presentation of festivals, traditions, costumes, and geography, thereby developing language awareness and breaking down stereotypical misconceptions. Through collaboration with teachers, parents prepared and shared their cultural and linguistic realities with students by means of a variety of pedagogical activities. The project showed that the initiative resulted in major changes in both parents’ and teachers’ conception of the relationships between home and school. This collaboration led to more inclusive views of linguistic and cultural diversity; deeper awareness of the global positioning and value of multilingualism. While the transformation emerged from collaboration between teachers and parents, it was the parents’ participation that gave it more authenticity. Activities included sharing meals, personal photographs, and cultural artefacts, modelling traditional clothes and offered a “direct experience of diversity” (Hélot & Young, 2006, p. 82)

These examples illustrate the potential impact that parental engagement initiatives can have on school-community relations and on patterns of teacher-student interactions. They raise questions about the underlying assumptions of more typical patterns of school-community relations. For example, to what extent do schools reinforce the belief that all parents matter or that parents are an integral rather than a peripheral part of schools and communities? Are teachers adequately prepared to meaningfully engage parents who, based on their own cultural beliefs and immigrant status, may feel like intruders in school communities? By adopting a perspective that enmeshes participation, involvement and engagement and exploring a highly interactive and culturally responsive strategy, the Parkdale case study potentially opens up critical perspectives on these issues.

Methods and data sources

The study was conducted over the period of one academic year in an inner-city school in Toronto with a very diverse student population. At that time, there were about 600 students enrolled in the school and approximately 20-40 different languages were spoken by the student body. The school population was also constantly changing and at one point 300 new students arrived

over an 18-month period. Recently, there has been a decrease in enrolment due to immigration patterns but there are still many newcomers, with increases of 10-20 new students each week, resulting in very large classes. The school has a French immersion programme from grade 3 and every teacher is considered an ESL teacher.

The origins of the current project go back to 2008 when Jennifer Carey became the Teacher-Librarian. Jennifer had taught in the school since 1995 and in her new role was eager to reach out to parents in order to get parental support for the library and to make broader community connections. The school partnered with the School Community Worker, for an initiative entitled *Parents in the Library* (PIL) that involved structured once-weekly meetings for parents in the school library.

Initially, the PIL group focused on invited speakers who would advise on parenting issues and help parents navigate the school system. The size of the group varied depending on the topic of the session. Over the years, a core group of mothers participated on a regular basis and their conversations and questions helped guide future plans for the group.

In 2012-2013 the project evolved to include collaboration with university researchers (Naqvi, Cummins, and Altidor-Brooks) and we decided to focus our work with the mothers on their personal stories, as we had heard many wonderful stories from them over the years. A typical session began with the use of picture books as models and starting points to tell stories about celebrations, food, family and immigration. The women would then share their own stories with the group through verbal narratives. Next, they would write their stories in English and often also in their home languages. Over the course of the academic year, the mothers shared their stories with some of the junior classes (grades 4-6). As documented below, both the children and parents found this experience empowering. Storytelling continued to be a theme that spread to the classrooms, and students began to write their own personal stories. Against this backdrop, the research component of the project set out to explore with parents, the conditions under which parents' funds of knowledge could be mobilized within the school.

Those directly involved in the project included a core group of 11 parents, the teacher librarian, community liaison worker, and a university-based researcher and research assistant who collaboratively established a context of trust by sharing their own

and/or their families' stories of language learning and immigration to Canada. The parents shared their experiences of immigration, aspirations for their children, and observations about their children's schooling and language learning (both the school language and L1).

We collected the data for this investigation from two main sources. First, we documented the stories that parents and facilitators shared during the meetings and the discussions of these stories that ensued. Participants typically read stories about identity and diversity after which they wrote their own stories. This interpersonal sharing over several months evolved into the writing of identity texts which parents then read (in L1 and English) at round table discussions and to groups of students. Cummins, Early and other colleagues (2011) have elaborated the concept of identity texts as an instructional tool to link identity affirmation and literacy engagement.

In this study these texts included stories about the meanings of the parents' names, their arrival stories in Canada and memorable experiences involving Canadian culture. Secondly, the parents, teacher-librarian and the community liaison worker each participated in one-time semi-structured interviews, which lasted from 15 to 30 minutes. The participants were asked questions about their views on the activities they had participated in and the analysis of the data was based on themes that emerged from the responses. The audio and video recordings were then transcribed by the research assistant. There were also follow-up sessions with the parents for stimulated recall, approximately 30 days after the first interview.

Participants

The participants in this study provided different perspectives on parental engagement. Of the 11 parents, 10 spoke a variety of languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Bengali, Spanish and Mandarin as their L1. Other languages spoken by the parents included French, English, Farsi and Jamaican Creole. All the parents were female and their ages ranged from 36-47 years. The length of time they had been in Canada ranged from 3-24 years. To recruit interviewees, the scope and details of the research project were discussed at the regular weekly parent group meeting and participants were asked to read and sign letters of informed consent. All interviews were held in the school library.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews with the parents addressed participants' arrival experiences in Canada and their perspectives on the different activities in the school with questions prompting participants to talk about their experiences and ideologies. The interviews also addressed the Canadian educational system, specifically parents' attitudes and perceptions. Building on these points, the interview then discussed specific barriers to engagement in school life, including (a) the level of trust or distrust of the school, school system, or other parents, (b) communication with school and other parents and (c) compliance with school expectations. Interviews were also conducted with the teacher-librarian and the community liaison worker, which addressed the nature of parental engagement at the school, the chronology of parental engagement and activities of the school and the different barriers to parental engagement.

Emergent themes and findings

Story telling is a powerful tool to communicate events and ideas. Narration of life events can help people relate to each other and therefore engage productively. "The truth about stories is that that's all we are. You can't understand the world without telling a story" (King, 2003, p. 32). Stories are powerful; stories invoke imagination and if the listeners relate to the stories they begin to own them. A growing body of research (Dunlop, 1999; Clandinin & Huber, 2002) shows that stories can help change deeply entrenched viewpoints. The theme of storytelling emerged early on as we got to know the parents in our workshop better and they started to share their stories.

Conditions for identity affirmation can be created through the introduction of parental workshops that involve "sharing of stories". Sharing stories in the case of the Parkdale project enabled the participants to discuss various aspects of their heritage that included immigrating to Canada, celebrations and cultural practices as well as meanings of names and the symbolism associated with specific cultural practices. We started the year off talking and writing about personal experiences: how did you get your name? What was school like when you were a child? What was it like coming to Canada?

This process enabled participants to share their experiences in multiple ways. First, it provided an opportunity to listen and share stories that the teachers may not have heard before. For example, Khala discussed specific cultural practices in Turkey and

described her experiences of schooling in Canada. She shared stories of her multilingual background and international experiences in Asia. Second, through the process, parents were able to bring 'the private' into the public space. A striking example of this is Keisha's description of her first snowfall in Canada and how she went out in the open air to enjoy the snow without wearing warm clothing. The mothers identified with this account and took turns discussing their own impressions and feelings about the Canadian winter experience. Third, sharing stories about aspects of Canadian culture that were unfamiliar to them was also a means to build trust and friendships between all participants. Keisha also talked about the fact that while she had never seen a squirrel in her life in Jamaica, her mother would frequently tell her stories about squirrels as a child. When she came to Canada and she saw a squirrel she called her mother in Jamaica to tell her that she now knows what a real squirrel looked like. Hope's (from Mexico) account of the "presents she got from the Canadian society when she immigrated to Canada" is indicative of one of the bridges of the cultural divide. She includes among these "gifts" public libraries, food from around the world, snow, and English.

Names and the meanings behind them formed another important topic of discussion for all participants. Through sharing various stories about names several themes emerged. Parents expressed pride in their names and shared stories about how and why they were named. This was clearly illustrated when mothers from the Tibetan community described how children were named after the Lamas in the Tibetan culture. Another example came from Jui: "My name is Jui. My real first name means a kind of flower. My last name means "pleased". (Translated for Jui in English by one of the researchers): "Jui thinks that "pleased" is exactly like who she is. She is pleased with life. Although she has ambitions, she follows them cautiously. She thinks that if something is meant to happen in her life, then it will. And if not, it is because Allah does not will it to happen. And so she is pleased with life, embodying the meaningfulness of her name.

Khala's story provides another powerful example of the significance of names. She relates the story of her mother getting married at a young age and being unable to get pregnant for several years. Khala's grandmother went on the religious pilgrimage to perform Haj in Saudi Arabia. She prayed for her daughter during this pilgrimage. When she returned to Turkey she found out that her daughter was expecting a child. As a gesture of

thanksgiving Khala was named after the holy city of Mecca. This was also an opportunity to share linguistic knowledge that included describing how their names were written; for example, in Arabic, Turkish, Chinese and Bengali. In writing their stories several of the participants chose to first write in their home languages. The stories were then translated in English by parents and members of the team of researchers.

While the process of storytelling and writing involved a focus on “differences” across cultures and various socio-cultural practices and how they all related to them it also provided a rich context for a discussion of similarities. People can relate to emotions such as happiness, sadness, loneliness and fear. Discussing emotions indirectly through stories allows others to relate to their emotions and thereby understand different cultural perspectives, which in turn promotes acceptance of differences. This was specifically explored through a series of books authored by Gwenyth Swain (1999, 2000) that focus on Celebrations, Eating and Smiling. As the weeks progressed, participants articulated a sense of pride in their identities and expressed their growing confidence through the process. This conversation continued through in-depth interviews with the participants, during which, the participants expressed a sense of empowerment which they attributed to the process. They talked about their English language skills and how the workshops had helped them overcome their fears of being unable to express themselves adequately in English.

Three distinguishable but related categories emerged from our analyses of the meaning and nature of parental engagement for empowerment of both parents and students: (1) empowerment through identity texts (2) meaningful and sustainable engagement (3) identity: becoming Canadian. There were many features of trust building which were pivotal in this transformational activity. First, the teacher-librarian, community liaison and the researchers created a learning community in which the parents felt respected and that their experiences and knowledge were valued. Second, the teacher-librarian created opportunities to engage parents in reading stories, writing, and talking about the significance of the stories for their lived experiences. Third, the teacher-librarian encouraged the parents to share their stories with their own children and with other children in the school by reflecting on their experiences through stories.

We analysed selected excerpts as expressions of both identity and ideology (Van Dijk, 2006) by looking at how the parents

established affiliation or disaffiliation with Canada or their home countries by discussing certain features in the examples and the extent to which they contribute to the way in which the parents view and value their own multicultural identities. Further, we examined the ways in which systems in Canada are referenced and discussed the extent to which these instances revealed the affirmation and negotiation of identity.

For example, Yao Yun's knowledge of the education system in Canada as well as her involvement in the perennial discourse of the weather shows her affiliation with Canadian society and Canadian culture: "Toronto winter is crazy". Her discussion about improving her language skills: "I take some programs" demonstrated her exercise of agency and attempts to increase her linguistic and cultural capital by taking English classes, building a snowman and going fishing and camping. Repetition of the phrase "I like Toronto", "I like here", "That's fine" and "Yeah, it's good", shows her overall positive image of Canada in spite of the fact that she perceives many differences between Canadian and Chinese cultures. Most importantly, it was through the story telling and the identity text that she was able to articulate this.

For Khala, getting involved with the school community by going to meetings and volunteering was a gateway opportunity for her and an essential part of becoming part of the school and having some value in her children's education. She admits being grateful for these opportunities, but states clearly that it was the writing sessions that had the strongest impact on her in the sense of giving her a deep sense of engagement. She repeats "I like the writing sessions", "I like the writing". She describes feeling empowered by the sessions and describes the opportunity almost as a transfer of power: "Because we are getting a lot of information on different topics and this writing gives us the opportunity to [give] feedback and tell about us". However, Khala compares her life in Turkey as being restricted and unfulfilling: "Uh, for me, uh, it's easier to be Canadian than being Turkish. There are a lot of restrictions in our culture. So, back in Turkey, it's more difficult for me than living in Canada.", but seemed attached to her Turkish identity. She admits to feeling "not completely Canadian".

Discussion

The participants in the study showed a strong affiliation with the language and culture of their countries of origin, even when they appeared to affiliate with Canadian society through their knowledge

of and familiarity with Canadian social systems and their adoption of Canadian values. In their narratives, there are clear indications of conflicts of identity between their cultural heritage and the process of becoming Canadian. These tensions in the process of acculturation are not necessarily a negative phenomenon for either children or parents. For example, in a large-scale longitudinal study, Portes and Rumbaut (2001, p. 190) highlighted the ways in which identity negotiation mediates patterns of acculturation and academic achievement. They point out that all children of immigrants are inescapably engaged in a process of making sense of who they are and finding a meaningful place in the society of which they are the newest members. Their study highlighted the consistent positive effects of what they term *selective acculturation* both on student self-esteem and academic achievement. In contrast to full assimilation where students largely abandon their parents' cultural norms and home language, selective acculturation slows down the cultural shift and supports partial retention of the parents' home language and norms. Portes and Rumbaut summarized their findings which indicated the benefits of selective acculturation as "intertwined with preservation of fluent bilingualism and linked, in turn, with higher self-esteem, higher educational and occupational expectations, and higher academic achievement" (p. 274).

We call this emerging identity "long-term newcomer". While this term may imply a failure to adapt to Canadian society, we believe that represents is a process of integrating components of their cultures of origin with those of Canadian society. It is not surprising that this takes time and the tension between these dimensions of identity is not necessarily a negative thing. The length of time which this process takes may lead people from diverse cultures to experience the "long-term newcomer" identity as part of the process of negotiating a different identity.

Parents articulated how empowering the collaborative sharing of experiences and stories had been for them and several expressed their intention to volunteer within the school in the following year. The themes of affirmation of identity and empowerment through meaningful engagement surfaced in all of the interviews, and revolved around a contrast between their experiences with being involved in different activities in the school and their more recent experiences with the story-telling activities. The storytelling activities made them feel more meaningfully

engaged with their school, the community and at the core, their children's education and academic success.

The project documents the process of establishing an interactional space where parents' linguistic and cultural talents and experiences are acknowledged and valued. In this model, parents from low-SES immigrant-background communities engaged actively with the school and contributed in significant ways to the education of students. Furthermore, the reading of dual language (Naqvi et al. 2013) or L1 stories to students within the school validates students' own linguistic knowledge and encourages continued development of students' languages and appreciation of various multicultural dynamics within their school.

The project illustrates the benefits for the entire school community of this kind of two-way engagement and can serve as a model for individual teachers who are looking for ways to increase parental involvement. The project also challenges generic approaches to educational reform and school improvement that consign issues of cultural and linguistic diversity to the margins of concern.

Conclusion

In both Canada and the United States and possibly other developed countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom which experience strong migration patterns, major initiatives in educational reform over the past 15 years have missed the mark in treating issues of cultural and linguistic diversity. Within these approaches, parental involvement has implicitly been characterized as one-way (from school to parents), with minimal focus on tapping into parents' resources. By contrast, the model implied by the present project (a) establishes two-way collaboration as the *modus operandi*, (b) focuses on parental and student literacy as a creative process of cultural production, (c) mobilizes parents' (and students') funds of knowledge by expanding the educational space to include multiple languages and cultures, and (d) creates ongoing interactional spaces that are empowering and identity-affirming for parents, students, and teachers. The outcomes of the project are consistent with our claim that parents from low-income marginalized communities will engage with the school only to the extent that such engagement is identity-affirming.

The longer-term effects for the parents who participated are also illuminating. The mothers became more confident in diverse and specific ways, including taking classes in creative writing,

taking college classes, volunteering regularly in the library, and leading staff on community walks to key locations in Parkdale, such as the food bank, the library and the local apartment building. Therefore, we conclude that there is considerable pay off for schools and students in enabling immigrant parents to recognize their expertise and cultural capital in social contexts where their competencies are frequently under-valued.

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