

What Does it Take to Form Meaningful Connections among Cultural Brokers, Parents, and Teachers? Lessons From a Grant-Funded Initiative in a Predominantly Latino Community

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to explore what factors facilitate and hinder meaningful connections among cultural brokers, parents, and teachers. We examined how trust and respect – or the lack thereof – manifested in relationships among cultural brokers, parents, and teachers; how trust and respect improved over time; and to what extent improved trust and respect between cultural brokers and teachers dismantled uneven power differentials between teachers and parents. During the 2013/14 school year, across five schools participating in a federal grant to support family engagement, we conducted over 30 semi-structured focus groups with English and Spanish speaking parents, paid parent volunteers, and teachers; interviews with Collaborators, school leaders, and project staff; and observations of grant activities. Focus groups and interviews included many of the same respondents in the fall and the spring in order to assess change. We supplement these data with quantitative data tracking parent participation in grant activities. We found that trust and respect were the foundation of meaningful connections among cultural brokers, teachers, and parents. Trust and respect among these groups improved through a combination of intentional relationship-building activities and more opportunities for these groups to interact regularly. Despite these improvements, many teachers continued to harbor deficit-based attitudes toward parents. Our main conclusion is that increasing daily interactions between teachers and cultural brokers cannot undo the effect of hegemonic norms that characterize poor families, families of color, immigrant families, and single-parent families as lazy and uncaring at worst and simply *unable* to be good parents at best. Our findings reinforce the significance of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Home-School Partnerships, released by the Department of Education in 2014. Effective partnership between parents and teachers depends on simultaneous efforts to develop the capacities of both groups. We suggest a variety of practical strategies for achieving this goal.

Introduction

Schools and school districts frequently rely on “cultural brokers” to engage and support culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families (López & Stack, 2001; Hong, 2011; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007). Cultural brokers are individuals or organizations that help CLD families navigate the language, customs, and norms of the school and school system while simultaneously affirming parents’ own culture and rights (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2001; Hong, 2011; Lawson & Alameda Lawson, 2012; López & Stack, 2001; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007). Scholars have shown how cultural brokers develop social capital between CLD families and between CLD families and teachers (Hong, 2011; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Social capital is defined here as “the set of resources that inhere in relationships of trust and cooperation between people” (Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001, p. 1). Students and schools benefit from social capital, as social capital establishes common norms and values that adults collectively reinforce to students and facilitates the dissemination of important information (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2010; Coleman, 1988). However, underserved communities benefit less from social capital than their more economically privileged counterparts (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; McNeal, 1999), as social capital is only helpful insofar as there are *resources* embedded in the networks (Lin, 2000). Cultural brokers generate social capital *and* render it more productive by spreading information throughout networks and helping to bridge norms and build trust between parents and between parents and teachers. However, research about what challenges cultural brokers face in this process and how they overcome these challenges is limited.

Research on the impact of cultural brokers in predominantly immigrant communities illustrates that cultural brokering is most effective when brokers are trusted and respected, exhibit trust of and respect toward others, and cultivate trust and respect between parents and between parents and teachers (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Hong, 2011; Lawson & Alameda Lawson, 2012; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007). The purpose of this study is to explore what factors facilitate and hinder trust and respect among cultural brokers, parents, and teachers. This question emerged from the evaluation of a multi-million dollar grant issued to a small urban school district in a northeastern city. The goals of the initiative were to improve student outcomes through institutionalizing a Pre-K – Grade 3 culture that makes families feel welcome, valued, and respected; connected to their peers, schools, and communities; and able to support their children socially and academically.

The small city in which we conducted this research has a population of approximately 19,000. The city is culturally and linguistically diverse, with 73% of the population speaking a language aside from English in the home and 43% having been born outside of the U.S. (American Community Survey, 2009). The majority of those born outside of the U.S. emigrated from Latin America (67%), although residents have also emigrated from North America (12%), Europe (12%), Africa (8%), and Asia (1%) (American Community Survey, 2009). One-third of families with children under the age of 18 are in poverty. The school district has an enrollment of approximately 2,800 students. 81% of the district’s students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch, and the student body is 73% Latino, 12% Black, 13% White, and 2% other races. Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of the teachers are White and only speak English. The intervention staffed each of the five participating schools with a full-time bilingual cultural broker, termed “Collaborator.” All five of the Collaborators were Latino/a, had roots in the

community, and spoke Spanish and English. Four of the five Collaborators were immigrants. Each Collaborator oversaw a team of 1-9 parent leaders, who were paid small stipends in exchange for at least 12 hours of volunteer work per week in the schools. The broader goal of the parents' volunteer commitment was for them to become equipped with the capacity to also serve as cultural brokers. Thus, our use of the term "cultural brokers" includes both Collaborators and parent leaders.

Next, we further define trust and respect and review the literature on these constructs as they relate to cultural brokers. Then, we describe how the dominance of the cultural deficit model limits trust and respect between teachers and parents.

Trust and Respect

Trust facilitates social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995). Put simply, trust is a willingness to be vulnerable to others based on confidence that the other party is altruistic (benevolent), has relevant skills (competent), shares and does not withhold important information (open), does what is promised (reliable), and tells the truth (honest) (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). People tend to trust one another because they perceive the other as similar (characteristic-based trust); have confidence in another's credentials or affiliation (institution-based trust); have positive regular communication and social exchange (relational trust); and/or assume that the benefits of trusting another will outweigh the costs (calculative trust). Two conditions distinguish trust from respect; trust can only exist when individuals or groups are *interdependent* and when trusting yields a degree of *risk* (Rousseau et al., 1998). Because relationships between parents and between parents and teachers tend to lack characteristic- or institution-based trust, cultural brokers are tasked with minimizing the risks that parents and teachers tend to perceive in trusting one another (Lareau, 1989; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978) and providing opportunities for the development of relational trust. For example, cultural brokers help individuals recognize their common experiences and goals, often through small-group activities, story-telling, and explicit conversations about race and discrimination (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Hong, 2011; Lawson & Alameda Lawson, 2012).

Trust is a useful framework when actors are interdependent; however, respect is a more useful construct than trust to frame relationships between actors who are less interdependent. For example, parents arguably depend on cultural brokers to a greater extent than cultural brokers depend on parents. Respect involves helping others to take control of their lives; promoting their well-being and wholeness; engaging in authentic dialogue with careful listening; demonstrating genuine curiosity about peoples' fears and dreams; and feeling confident enough to not seek public affirmation or validation (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000). Cultural brokers listen to and build upon parents' strengths and aspirations; encourage the development of professional and leadership skills; and enable parents to converse in their own languages (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Hong, 2011; Lawson & Alameda Lawson, 2012). More specifically, cultural brokers may respect parents by acknowledging and valuing the "cultural community wealth" (Yosso, 2005) that schools tend to overlook; for example, their abilities to navigate discriminatory institutions (navigational capital), resist negative stereotypes and conditions (resistance capital), aspire despite structural obstacles (aspirational capital), and communicate in more than one language (linguistic capital).

The Cultural Deficit Model as an Impediment to Trust and Respect

Despite the many successes of cultural brokers, research illustrates that their efforts are often stunted because of the way school and district staff perceive CLD parents, define family engagement, and maintain authority and control (Gold, Hartmann, & Lewis, 2005; Hong, 2011; Ishimaru, 2014; López, Krieder, & Coffman, 2005; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Trust and respect between parents and between parents and teachers in communities with many CLD parents and parents of color is challenged by the dominance of the cultural deficit model in American media, politics, and general popular discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Haney López, 2014), which attributes low educational attainment among people of color to their cultural values, which are transmitted through dysfunctional families, especially ones that are female-headed and where Spanish or non-standard English is spoken in the home (Solorzano, 1997; Valencia, 2010). Bonilla-Silva (2014) finds that these attitudes often manifest in a “gentle” and “at times even ‘compassionate’” way (p. 89), wherein White people empathize about how poverty limits opportunity, but they still believe that people of color’s “priorities are different” (p. 89) or that they are not able to support their children. Often times, teachers receive little training or professional development that counteracts default deficit-based norms (Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; Valencia, 2010). For example, teachers may interpret families’ disengagement from prescribed and privileged school-based activities as cultural deficits – that CLD parents do not value education or are lazy or uncaring (Greene, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CLD family members who do not speak English tend to face further discrimination (Adair, 2015; Solorzano, 1997).

Cultural brokers must therefore alter perceptions, beliefs, and power differentials in order to be most effective (López et al., 2005; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007), but there is little research in regard to what factors enable and inhibit cultural brokers’ abilities to generate trust and respect over time. Scholars who have studied how trust develops among actors in school communities argue that trust forms through, for example, “the daily process of school community members interacting—compromising, misunderstanding, accommodating, and butting heads—that relationships are built and school communities are shaped” (Lewis & Forman, 2002, p. 83). In their seminal book on trust in schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) further argue that, “trust is forged in daily social exchanges,” (p. 136) rather than through workshops and retreats, although the authors acknowledge that the latter can be helpful. However, in light of vast power differentials, frequent social exchange may engender mistrust rather than build trust (Lareau, 1989; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978). To this point, Mapp and Kuttner (2014) state that efforts to develop family-school partnerships must include “a concerted focus on developing adult capacity” through professional development for educators and workshops and trainings for families.

Research Gaps and Questions

We seek to fill several gaps in the literature. Research on cultural brokers has typically explored how intermediary organizations connect with families, but these intermediary organizations tend to have little control over changing school culture or transforming teachers’ mindsets (Ishimaru, 2014; López, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005). This study presents a unique opportunity to explore how cultural brokers can enact change within schools, because the Collaborators worked full-time inside of the schools. Additionally, most studies have examined

the role of professional cultural brokers, but this study offers an opportunity to examine the challenges and facilitators of building the capacity of parent leaders to also serve as cultural brokers. Additionally, more research is needed to understand to what extent and under what conditions cultural brokers can forge relationships with parents and teachers through daily social exchange versus through intentional efforts to build intra- and inter-group trust. This research is particularly pertinent considering cultural brokers are operating against the dominant frame of the cultural deficit model. We propose the following two research questions:

1. What challenges limited trust and respect between: cultural brokers (i.e., Collaborators and parent leaders and parent leaders and other parent leaders); cultural brokers and parents; and cultural brokers and teachers?
2. What factors facilitated the development of trust and respect over time in relationships between: cultural brokers (i.e., Collaborators and parent leaders and parent leaders and other parent leaders); cultural brokers and parents; and cultural brokers and teachers?

Methods

Study Context

Five schools participated in the intervention we evaluated, including: 1) a Head Start center housed in a social service agency, 2) a pre-school housed in a trusted community institution focused on serving Latino families, 3) a district-operated pre-Kindergarten, 4) a district-operated Kindergarten,ⁱ and 5) a district-operated elementary school serving students in grades 1-4. The grant also funded other family engagement resources, such as a parent room in each school, regular parent coffee hours, and parent workshops.

Data Collection

The data we present below emerged mainly from focus groups, interviews, and observations we conducted as evaluators of the initiative throughout the 2013-14 school year. Respondents had the opportunity to join focus groups with either an English-speaking or Spanish-speaking member of our research team. All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, with the exception of one teacher focus group and one school leader interview in which participants did not consent to being audio recorded. We conducted focus groups and interviews with cultural brokers, parents, and teachers.

Cultural brokers. We conducted focus groups in the fall and again in the spring with the parent leaders hired by the grant (See Appendix A for protocol). Almost all of the 20 parent leaders participated in the focus groups. Additionally, we conducted a focus group with all five Collaborators in the fall and one-on-one interviews with each of the five Collaborators the following spring (See Appendix B for protocol).

Parents. We conducted focus groups with 81 parents during the 2013-14 school year, inquiring about the extent to which they felt welcome, valued, and respected in their children's schools, connected to one another, the school and the community, and their opinions of the grant. Many of the same parents participated in focus groups in both the fall and the spring. All of the parent focus groups lasted for approximately 90 minutes and were conducted at the schools the children of the participants attended. Parents were compensated with a \$15 gift card to a local grocery store. The Collaborators recruited the parents through a variety of methods, including

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advertising the group around the school and in the parent room, personally inviting parents to attend, and sending fliers home with students. They successfully recruited parents with varied levels of participation in school-based family engagement activities.

Teachers and school staff. Throughout the 2013-14 school year, we conducted 7 focus groups with teachers and school staff representing 4 of the 5 schools. Recruitment strategies and data collection procedures varied widely in order to adapt to the unique arrangements and schedules of each of the schools. We collected qualitative data from teachers through four focus groups, seven one-on-one interviews, and a faculty meeting where we asked for individual written responses to open-ended questions about their opinions regarding family engagement, and then facilitated a large-group discussion. We supplemented these data with individual interviews of six teachers at the three district schools in Fall 2014, during which we asked them to reflect on the previous year. All of the school leaders (e.g., center directors or principals) participated in either a one-on-one interview or a focus group with other staff-members during the fall.

Further, 18 teachers at the district pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten completed a scale measuring their trust in families (Adams & Christenson, 2000). The 13-item scale asked teachers to rate from 1-4 (1=strongly disagree, 4=strongly agree) their confidence that parents, for example, were doing a good job teaching their child to follow rules and directions, encouraging their child to have a positive attitude toward learning, and participating in their child's education. The two non-district pre-schools did not participate in the survey because their staff was so small, and the district elementary school principal opted out.

Supplemental data. Interviews with each of the six members of the implementation team during the 2013-14 school year—once in the fall and again in the spring—provided broader context about strengths and challenges with implementation, the history of family engagement in the community, and the school district itself. The implementation team included staff from the school district and two partner organizations who were most involved in the day-to-day operations of implementing the initiative. Observations of family engagement activities at each of the schools, including coffee hours and Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings, also triangulated our data. Finally, we supplemented our qualitative data with records of the number of parents who participated in various grant-related activities during the 2013-14 school year.

Data Analysis

Our research team systematically coded the transcripts using qualitative data analysis software called Dedoose. We began by creating an initial codebook based on our focus group and interview protocols, but subsequently used open coding—adding a substantial number of codes to our initial codebook throughout the process—to ensure that our analyses were guided by the voices of the participants and acknowledged spontaneous themes and categories (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). Early in the process, three members of the research team coded the same transcripts in order to clarify our definitions of codes and establish reliability. After the three coders coded all of the transcripts, two additional members of the research team checked the coded transcripts to further clarify code definitions and applied any codes that the coders had overlooked.

The research questions for this study emerged organically from salient themes identified in the data, as we heard from numerous stakeholders about the successful strategies and the challenges associated with forging meaningful relationships in the process of cultural brokering. In order to answer the research questions, we synthesized excerpts related to relationships among

parent leaders, parents, teachers, and Collaborators. We collectively mapped the factors that facilitated and hindered relationships between these groups and then arrived at a consensus around six salient themes. We discussed to what extent the themes resonated with our knowledge of the community, the data, and our own experiences. The unique cultures of each of the five schools influenced challenges and facilitators of establishing trust and respect. Due to limited space, we do not unpack those contextual differences; rather, we highlight the challenges and facilitators that were most salient across all of the schools.

Our research team is diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, culture, family immigration history, professional background, experience level, and area of content expertise. Importantly, the majority of the team-members are parents. These varied and common aspects of our positionality shaped how we interpreted data, and our team diversity enabled rich ongoing peer debriefing throughout the data collection, analysis, synthesis, and interpretation process. For example, our team engaged in several conversations about the merits and value of parent volunteering, bringing our multiple identities as researchers and family members into the conversation. We also presented our data to parents, teachers, Collaborators, and members of the implementation team in order to clarify and enhance our interpretations.

Results

Challenges of Establishing Trust and Respect

Two primary deterrents of trust and respect interacted with one another: 1) the assumption—consistent with the cultural deficit model—that parents and parent leaders were lazy or deficient, and 2) the risk that teachers perceived in trusting parent leaders.

The dominant cultural deficit model was apparent in the attitudes of teachers toward parent leaders and other parents; the dominant idea of deficiency of non-English speaking individuals living in America also pervaded teacher and parent attitudes. Teachers' and non-Spanish-speaking parents' critiques of Spanish-speaking parent leaders reflected normative attitudes toward immigrants of color that the system benefits them at the expense of American born, English speakers. Teachers referred to Spanish-speaking parent leaders as too "clique-y" and as spending too much time in the parent rooms gossiping. On the open-ended anonymous questionnaire we disseminated at the district Pre-K and Kindergarten, four out of 11 teachers who answered a question about the effectiveness of the parent rooms alluded to this:

"Maybe a clique? Inequitable treatment, Spanish vs. English."

"I don't see many parents in the parent room. The people who I do see are drinking coffee and not much else. Spanish-speaking parents get specific help compared to others."

"Seems to have been a clique. All parents are Spanish speaking. I don't feel that all parents are welcome."

"Have become a place for Spanish-speaking families, while English speakers don't feel as welcome."

Rather than perceiving connections between Spanish-speaking parents as a source of strength and support that would benefit them and their children, teachers assumed they were only gossiping and resented that they seemed to be benefiting more than their English-speaking counterparts. Several parents who spoke only English echoed these attitudes. One parent said,

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“And when it comes to greeting, [parent leaders] only greeted the Spanish people. And I think it’s for the reason that the people that are in charge of actually greeting and giving you information once you come into the door are the Spanish people. And the Spanish people basically only talk to Spanish people and they have their little group.” Not only did this parent think that parents who did not speak English were cliquish, but she also assigned to them an identity (Spanish) that is inaccurate and homogenizes the Latino community. Rather than respecting parent leaders for the various forms of capital they could offer as Spanish speakers and as immigrants, teachers and non-Spanish speaking parents tended to only perceive deficits.

Many teachers reported having a difficult time communicating with parent leaders who did not speak English, and they tended to prefer English-speaking parents to help in the classroom. Only a few teachers saw the benefit of having Spanish or Portuguese-speaking parents in the classroom to help with students who spoke those languages. Other teachers felt that speaking Spanish to the Spanish-speaking students in the classroom was not helpful and that only English should be spoken in the school. Teachers distanced themselves from parent leaders, believing that the costs of their time and energy outweighed the benefits.

Even though the parent leaders entered the school with established roles (volunteers), teachers questioned their presence and motives. Prior to the grant, parents were not participating or volunteering in the classroom in such large numbers, and teachers were not accustomed to having parents play such an active role in the school. Teachers’ initial lack of trust was not subtle; one parent leader said, “I think that, at first [teachers] were a little evasive with us and kept their distance.” Parent leaders had to demonstrate to teachers that they were there to work with them and not against them. As a parent leader pointed out, “That the teachers see us as people coming to lend them a hand was a difficult thing.” This attitude created a challenging environment for the parent leaders. To parent leaders, entering the school felt like, “We went to a different world: the teachers, the principal. We could barely enter; the school belonged to them; to the teachers and students.” Teachers alluded to the risk associated with trusting parent leaders: that some volunteers would suddenly stop volunteering after the teachers had invested time and energy into working with them (unreliable), that they lacked the appropriate skillset to help (incompetent), or that they would violate confidentiality rules and repeat confidential student information to other parents (dishonesty).

Despite high levels of parent engagement in school-based activities, teacher trust in parents generally remained low at the three district schools. On the teacher survey administered to a total of 18 teachers (75% response rate) across the district-operated Pre-K and Kindergarten, 11 of the 18 teachers indicated that they strongly disagreed or disagreed that parents were “doing a good job participating in their children’s education.” On the open-ended questionnaire, we asked teachers to respond with their opinions about “creat[ing] a PTO and seek[ing] at least one teacher to attend the meetings.” We included this prompt because parent focus group participants had expressed a strong desire to establish a PTO. Although three of the 18 teachers/staff who responded agreed that this was a good idea, the rest of the respondents expressed skepticism:

“Parents need training on what’s expected from them.”

“It’s hard to get the parents involved to begin with, and it is never the parents we need to get involved.”

“In past years there has been history of unprofessional behavior on the part of parents such as misrepresentation/mistranslation of parent comments, enormous information generated by some adults. Having faculty present would be a sensible solution.”

“If parents actually came and contributed it may be beneficial.”

In these comments, teachers alluded to their lack of confidence that parents were competent (“need training on what’s expected”); honest (“misrepresentation/mistranslation of parent comments”); reliable (“if parents actually came...”); and benevolent (“it’s hard to get the parents involved...”). These comments illustrate the risk that teachers perceived in trusting parents and a lack of respect for what parents could contribute to the school.

Parent leaders also sometimes expressed a lack of trust and respect toward other parents. With the exception of a few parent leaders, many viewed themselves as more motivated and attentive to their children’s needs than other parents. These parent leaders judged less-active parents harshly, blaming parents for their lack of participation and not recognizing the circumstances where parents might find themselves. For example, one parent leader said:

There are many parents who are not interested in having a good relationship with the school, because last year I remember I was a volunteer at [the district Kindergarten], when there were meetings at the coffee hour you said to [parents], “look, can’t you stay for half an hour, there is going to be a meeting during coffee hour, the teachers are going to talk about how the kids are doing” and they say: “no, I don’t have time, that’s a waste of time” or “it’s the teachers job to teach our children” or any silly thing they made up not to attend.

This parent leader alluded to her lack of confidence in parents’ honesty and benevolence, expressing that parents “made up” excuses not to attend meetings at the school and cited their lack of interest in having a good relationship with the school. There was little curiosity or empathy for parents’ wholeness and the multiple reasons why parents might not be able to actively participate in school-based activities. One parent leader said, “But what happens when there are four or five parents who are committed at a school, and the rest are not? Unfortunately, our children and us, the committed parents, suffer the effects of the bad example set by others.” Parent leaders recognized that the success of their own children depended in part on the behavior of other parents, but the dominant belief that low-income parents and especially low-income parents of color were uncommitted to education prohibited parent leaders from trusting and respecting the parents they were supposed to be supporting. Therefore, parent leaders distanced themselves from other parents, calculating that the risk would outweigh the benefits.

Factors that Facilitated Trust and Respect to Improve

Below, we illustrate evidence that trust and respect grew over time and offer four explanations that arose from the data. We note, however, that none of these strategies were a panacea; at the end of the school year, some parent leaders continued to express deficit beliefs about other parents (e.g. “Some parents don’t care about their kids”; “Some parents are lazy”). The results from the teacher survey presented above are further evidence that many teachers still did not trust parents by the end of the school year. Furthermore, by the end of the school year, only two of the five Collaborators reported that there was sufficient trust with teachers to engage them in conversations about how to better understand their students’ families and the community.

Nevertheless, the four factors we describe below yielded considerable improvement. First, Collaborators modeled respect to parent leaders and parents and acknowledged their

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cultural community wealth, which in turn, enabled them to trust and respect one another more. Three additional factors helped to minimize the perceived risks of trusting, including: 1) interactions between stakeholders that centered around children; 2) persistence and patience by Collaborators and parent leaders in earning the trust and respect of teachers; and 3) intentional grant-funded activities and opportunities for relationship-building. Thus, a combination of daily interactions and intentional interventions helped to improve trust and respect among Collaborators, parent leaders, parents, and teachers.

Respect and acknowledgment of cultural community wealth. The Collaborators in every one of the schools expressed respect towards parents. Whether they “approach people like [they’re] part of my family” or “I become one of them,” the Collaborators viewed the parent leaders as their equals. Parent leaders did not have to earn the Collaborators’ trust and respect. As part of the community, the Collaborators felt intimately connected to the parents. Some shared the same cultural background and language, and all shared the experience of being residents of the same city. Such characteristic-based trust facilitated relationships, but genuine and deliberate relationship building on the part of Collaborators were also critical. One Collaborator described how she was deliberate about building relationships with parents who did not automatically respect or trust her:

... even though that parent is trouble making, they deserve respect. They deserve to be—you pay attention enough, you need to find out what problem the parents have in order to help. Not to think, “Oh no, this is a troublemaker. Oh, let me avoid this parent,” no. Or, some time you pick the parents that you can make control. I don’t like to control people.

This Collaborator alluded to important aspects of respect, including careful listening, demonstrating genuine concern and care, and not trying to control parents. Additionally, she illustrated her willingness to be vulnerable to parents who might be “trouble making.”

Parent leaders felt seen and respected by Collaborators. A parent leader described her relationship with the Collaborators, “She treats us equal...Our interactions are open. We are like a family.” They were able to pick up on this genuine concern from the time and effort the Collaborators put into getting to know them without questioning their motives. Collaborators felt that parent leaders had something to offer, and they encouraged them to share their skills with one another and develop them further. Collaborators appreciated the parents’ skills regardless of their background or their education level. For example, a Collaborator shared, “Sometimes, ... they never went to school, but they have a lot of skills. I said, ‘If you can survive from your skill, show people that you have that power.’” Trust and respect grew among parent leaders as they taught one another new skills.

Collaborators also respected and honored parents’ linguistic capital. They noted the value of linguistic diversity for building powerful relationships among parents. In the parent room, a Collaborator noticed the interaction among two parents and how they supported each other even though they did not speak the same language. The Collaborator shared:

We have parents who don’t speak the English or Spanish...and so we try to put different parents to work together so they don’t feel ashamed. This morning, parents had to write a story about a book but that so difficult for [a] parent so another parent was working with

her explaining the story and writing the story for her. That to me is powerful.

In this case, linguistic diversity served as powerful tool to bring parents together. Another Collaborator shared her experience of developing a closer relationship with parents because she was able to translate from English to Spanish. For example, the Collaborator would spend time with one parent translating her mail. Parent leaders also served as translators for other parents, helping them communicate with teachers.

Collaborators also intentionally cultivated trust and respect between parent leaders through facilitating honest conversations and mediating conflict. One Collaborator shared:

Since we have so many parent volunteers and they're all from different nationalities, different backgrounds, different everything, it becomes a challenge because sometimes they don't know how to spend time with one another, communicate with one another, be around one another for so long. So it has been a challenge. We have had two different meetings to remind them what the rules are, because some days they forget and they might be disrespectful, or maybe they said something that someone didn't like.

Parent leaders eventually felt comfortable enough to be vulnerable to one another, sharing very personal information, such as their experiences with domestic violence or their inability to read or write. A parent leader described this feeling: “We feel like family, we're not afraid to ask each other for favors, because we trust each other now.” High rates of parent participation in grant activities also indicate the value of Collaborators trusting and respecting them. Not only did a wide range of parents participate in grant-related activities, but also, some parents participated a great deal. During the 2013-14 school year, almost half of the students in the five schools that were part of the initiative had a family member who attended at least one coffee hour at their children's school. Parents in these schools volunteered for approximately 5,700 hours—the equivalent to all of the school hours in over five school years. Twelve percent (N=180) of all of the parents in the five schools volunteered at least once, and 30% of these 180 parents (N=54) volunteered more than ten times. The district Pre-K and Kindergarten, respectively, had the highest levels of parent participation: over half (N=76) and almost one-fifth (N=46) of parents, respectively, volunteered at least once, and over three-fourths (N=107) and almost one-third (N=76) of parents attended at least one coffee hour.

Minimizing risk through child-centered interactions. When cultural brokers, teachers, and parents had the opportunity to engage in interactions that centered around promoting children's well-being, relational trust improved. Such interactions enabled stakeholders to recognize the positive outcomes that could come from their interdependence, rather than just focusing on the risks. Promoting student success provided common ground for parent leaders, parents, and teachers. Parent leaders often earned the trust of teachers and staff by demonstrating their dedication to students, and they gained confidence when teachers expressed appreciation for their work with students. One parent leader said, “The teacher would say that she missed me. This made us feel good, like [I was] a real support for them. Trust was built over time.” In turn, parent leaders witnessed the commitment and work ethic of teachers and the real challenges they faced. Simple observations of school administrators also helped change parents' perspectives from mistrust of school staff to appreciation of them. One parent leader said she became more

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trusting and interested in getting involved with school activities when she saw the school principal greet her child by name.

Collaborators also formed connections with parents and teachers through child-centered interactions. When there were linguistic barriers between parents and teachers, Collaborators met with parents, teachers, and sometimes students to facilitate conversations about a student's progress. One parent who struggled to assist her child with her homework began to approach the Collaborator for help. These interactions formed a bond between the parent and the Collaborator. Observing the Collaborators' bonds with families, teachers increasingly reached out to Collaborators to ask them to support parents and families. One Collaborator noted, "Because with that particular teacher, I was helping the parents and the student, and she [saw] the difference. So she trusts me because she know I make the difference." Further, parents formed relationships with other parents through their children. When students formed bonds with parent leaders in their classrooms, the students' parents often were curious and interested in getting to know who was spending time with their children.

Minimizing risk through persistence and patience. The majority of the changes brought about by daily social exchange did not occur incidentally, but rather through deliberate thought and hard work on the part of parent leaders and Collaborators. Collaborators modeled persistence to parent leaders. One Collaborator said, "I'm willing to go the extra mile either for the teacher or the parent if that's going to make it happen...if I have to be there another hour or so or come early in the morning." Often, helping teachers with mundane tasks such as translation paved the way for Collaborators to assume more meaningful roles. Once such trust was established, Collaborators were able to begin having meaningful conversations with teachers about family engagement. One shared:

I told the teacher about the parent I've been working with, that the parent doesn't know how to write. I tell the teacher we need to find out an easy way to give her easier ways to help. I know the whole family, the father, aunt, uncle, but their environment makes it hard for them to work with students, so the materials need to be accessible.

Parent leaders demonstrated aspirational capital—the ability to maintain hope and optimism despite barriers—when they were not discouraged by their initial exclusion from school culture and were willing to work hard to break down barriers with teachers. One parent leader described her persistence interacting with teachers leading to a change in a teacher's treatment of her:

...when I started, the teachers would be, like, people would be, like, "no." I still knocked on the door: "Do you need something done?" ... I always smile, you're always going to see me smile. "Hi. How are you doing? Good morning. Do you need something done? I'll do it for you. Do you need anything?" That's how I started. And now, I don't even have to do that.

Teachers who were originally weary of inconsistency of parent volunteer attendance were assured once they saw that parents continued to show up every day. One member of the grant's implementation team said:

The teachers are seeing, “Oh these parents, even though they don’t speak the language, they try their best and they want the best for the kids.” Because I think the notion was like, “Oh, they don’t care. They don’t come, so they don’t care.”

At another school, for teachers’ appreciation week, parents organized a lunch and gave teachers a small, hand-crafted gift every day. Parent leaders noted how teachers changed their attitudes toward them after this week: “From that moment on, they have understood who we are and what we are doing there, what our tasks were...teachers changed their vision of us. Even the principal of the school. The treatment completely changed.”

Minimizing risk through intentional relationship-building. Teachers reported more openness to working with parent volunteers when Collaborators managed the logistics of matching teacher needs to parent interests and skills and coordinating teacher and parent schedules. Teacher trust in parent leaders also improved once parents completed a district-run training on keeping student and family information confidential.

Parent leaders reported that a three-day Family Leadership Institute that was organized through a partnership between the district and a community organization helped them learn to work more effectively with school staff. A parent leader shared:

I had a vision very different from [the school’s]. I got involved because of a problem. But I came out with an open mind and with the tools so I could deal with that problem. And I can tell you that today it has been solved. I could teach them who I was, and teach respect, that they should have for me and I for them. And now the relationship is different.

Armed with these skills and confidence, parent leaders at one school remarked that teachers grew friendlier and more welcoming after the parent leaders met with the principal and expressed their hurt feelings when teachers did not acknowledge them or say hello. Although supporting teachers in the classroom was a form of empowerment for parents, the Family Leadership Institute enabled them to assert that they *deserved* trust and respect rather than struggling daily to *earn* it. The Institute also helped to unify parent leaders. One parent leader said, “sometimes you think that you are different than [other parents], and [at the Institute] we realized that we had much of the same grief, and I was not alone, and then we warmed up to each other, and we could work together the three days.”

Structured opportunities for parent leaders to interact with one another and with other parents also helped to promote trust between and among parent leaders and parents. Parent leaders reported that coffee hours with the principal provided an opportunity for them to come together with other parents to advocate for changes. For example, at one school, as a result of discussions during coffee hours, parents successfully advocated for the district to hire a crossing guard. At another school, parents spearheaded an effort to renovate the playground. The parent rooms at each of the schools provided a safe space for parent leaders to interact with one another informally and productively, over coffee or a meal. The parent rooms in each of the schools became spaces where parent leaders could feel “comfortable with people who [would] listen and [they] can trust,” according to a member of the implementation team.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine challenges and facilitators involved in cultivating trust and respect between cultural brokers, parent leaders, parents, and teachers during the first year of a grant-funded initiative to support family engagement in early childhood. This objective was worthy of exploration given that trust and respect are critical conduits of meaningful connections in school communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hong, 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1979). This study was unique from prior research in that it explored how professional staff helped to develop parent leaders' capacity to act as cultural brokers, examined relationships between cultural brokers and teachers, and offered insight into the relative power of daily interactions versus deliberate community-building activities.

The cultural deficit model initially hindered trust and respect by teachers toward parent leaders. Additionally, English-speaking teachers and parents assumed the worst of parents who spoke Spanish, failing to recognize the value of linguistic diversity in the school. Further, teachers and parent leaders expressed a sense of risk in trusting parents, who they deemed as lacking benevolence, competence, reliability, and honesty. Parent leaders had a difficult time seeing parents in their wholeness and empathizing about constraints that may have limited their involvement in school-based activities.

Trust and respect improved over time in several distinct ways. First, as Collaborators modeled respect to parent leaders, they grew increasingly comfortable working with one another, other parents, and teachers. Collaborators demonstrated respect to parents and parent leaders in multiple ways: helping parents who could not read or write in English and encouraging other parents to do the same; supporting parents and parent leaders as they advocated for change within the school; meeting parent leaders where they were while demonstrating high expectations; and using linguistic difference as an opportunity to unify rather than divide. This finding affirms the importance of cultural brokers having the skills to build trust and respect among others (Hong, 2011; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007), and the power of individuals in school communities who do not subscribe to the cultural deficit frame to cultivate meaningful connections.

Additionally, three factors helped to minimize the sense of risk that teachers and parents initially perceived. Relationships improved between and among all stakeholders as they increasingly witnessed one another's commitment to children (Lawrence Lightfoot, 1978, 2003). These child-centered interactions were facilitated by Collaborators, who mediated between teachers and parents on behalf of students and encouraged parent leaders to persevere for their right to be in the classroom. Further, through persistence, parent leaders navigated their way into volunteering in previously closed classrooms; they exhibited strong aspirational capital, maintaining hope and optimism that they could make a difference. Although parent leaders and Collaborators earned trust and respect through daily social exchange, intentional relationship building processes—such as time and space for dialogue and the Family Leadership Institute—greatly eased this process. Before the Leadership Institute, parents did not problematize the fact that they had to earn teachers' trust through politeness and menial tasks. The Leadership Institute developed parent leaders' resistance capital, as evidenced by their willingness to approach the principal and express concerns about teachers' lack of friendliness. It is important to note that parents knew the principal would be responsive to them due to the daily interactions they had shared throughout the course of the school year. Therefore, a combination of daily interactions with intentional intervention appeared to yield the strongest results.

Although teacher trust in and respect for parent leaders improved, consistent with other studies that have examined the outcomes of parent empowerment on school staff (Gold, Hartmann, & Lewis, 2005; Hong, 2011; Ishimaru, 2014; López, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005; Weinger & Lareau, 2003), the majority of school staff continued to emphasize parents' deficits. These attitudes held steadfast even after parents showed up in large numbers to school events. Daily social exchange between parents and teachers could not undo the effect of hegemonic norms that characterize poor families, families of color, immigrant families, and single-parent families as lazy and uncaring at worst and simply *unable* to be good parents at best (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Even highly skilled professional cultural brokers could not dispel ubiquitous and carefully architected ideas that poor people, people of color, and immigrants of color do not merit trust or respect (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Haney Lopez, 2014).

Implications

Before proceeding, we note several limitations. First, the data we discuss stemmed from only one year of implementation, so we were not able to examine how trust and respect grew over a long period of time. We recognize that this process typically requires time and patience. However, the realities of grant cycles, teacher turnover, and student mobility require identifying how connections can be cultivated in short periods of time. Second, as our primary role was to evaluate the grant, we did not have time or resources to conduct direct observations of interactions between parent leaders and teachers. Third, we cannot generalize our findings to other communities with different histories, contexts, demographics, and cultural traditions.

Despite these limitations, this study has several implications that may be transferable to other settings. Our findings indicate that in the presence of vast power differentials, daily social exchange alone is an insufficient driver of trust and respect, and this further reinforces claims that there must be intentionality around building the capacity of both parents *and* teachers/school staff to engage with one another in ways that will improve outcomes for students and schools (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). Otherwise, it is unlikely that greater connectedness—when connections rest on deference and politeness alone—will ever evolve into teachers trusting and respecting parents as authentic decision-makers and activists (Carreón, 2005; Ishimaru, 2014; Ochoa, Olivos, & Jiménez-Castellanos, 2011). Therefore, districts should invest in high-quality professional development that elicits authentic conversations about race, power, and privilege. More research is needed to understand how cultural brokers could complement teacher professional development and support teachers as they change their mindsets and practices, and as family engagement piles on top of teachers' daily challenges, long hours, and constant blame from the media and policy-makers, all of which make ceding control and time to families all the more risky (Geller, 2014).

In addition to high-quality professional development for teachers, this study illustrates that parent leaders also benefit from intentional activities and resources that build community and dismantle deficit perceptions of other parents. Through exhibiting unconditional trust and respect to parent leaders on a daily basis, Collaborators were able to reinforce and bolster the effects of activities and resources, such as the Family Leadership Institute and the parent rooms. Thus, districts and community organizations should hire cultural brokers who make it clear that they do not subscribe to the dominant cultural deficit model and should invest in activities and resources that support these individuals. The question for researchers now is not *whether* truly

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effective family engagement rests on systematic efforts to name, acknowledge, and dismantle imbalanced power dynamics, but rather, how and under what conditions these efforts become possible.

Conclusion

This study revealed the challenges of establishing trust and respect in school communities when individuals and groups have different backgrounds in regard to race, class, language, culture, and immigration history. Cultural brokers effectively cultivated trust and respect between these individuals and groups through respecting parent leaders and parents and through minimizing the perceived risk of trust. However, additional resources, such as parent rooms and the Family Leadership Institute, supplemented and advanced the work of cultural brokers. These findings illustrate that school districts with the goal of engaging more families must invest in individuals who can build relationships, as well as the infrastructure to support these individuals as they confront the bold and audacious work of countering the dominant cultural deficit model.

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Appendix A: Parent Leader Focus Group Protocol

1. (Go around in a circle). Describe your vision for family engagement in [this city]. Consider the role of parents, teachers, schools, and the community.
2. What do you see as your role as a parent leader in achieving that vision? *(If there is limited response, ask participants how they spend a typical day)*
3. How will you know if you've made a difference by the end of next school year?
4. Have you attended the Parent Leadership Institute training? *(count hands raised)* How well did the PLI training prepare you for this job? How could it be improved?
5. Have you attended the Confidentiality training? *(count hands raised)* How well did the Confidentiality training prepare you for this job? How could it be improved?
6. How has your experience as a parent leader influenced you personally? How has it influenced your child, if at all?
7. Please describe the successes and challenges you've had this year as a parent leader. Probe for strengths and challenges related to:
 - a. Working with teachers in the classroom
 - b. Reaching out to other parents
 - c. Working with children
 - d. *Ask about any other activities parent leaders mentioned as being part of their role*
8. What is your opinion of the [grant] activities *(go through them one by one)*? Think about whether they are helping parents feel more welcome, valued, and respected at the school; more connected to the school, one another, and the community; and whether they are helping parents and teachers improve children's social and academic skills. *Probe for these thoughts as respondents talk about each activity.*
 - a. Coffee hours
 - b. Parent room
 - c. PTOs
 - d. Parent Leadership Institute
 - e. Parent College
 - f. Incredible Years Parenting program
 - g. Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management program
9. Now we'd like your opinions on some of the recommendations to improve the grant that we made after the focus groups in the fall. What do you like or not like about these recommendations? How could they be improved?
 - a. Offer parent leaders more opportunities to share with parent leaders at other schools
 - b. Offer more structured opportunities for parents to get to know one another, such as during coffee hours, parent workshops, or at the family resource center/hub.

- c. Offer parents and parent leaders more opportunities to work together on addressing the problems that influence most of [this city's] schools, such as not enough teachers; lack of transportation to school and parking; and safety of the surrounding community.
- d. Provide training for teachers on how to better engage families (*Probe for what parents would like teachers to know*)

10. Anything else you would like to add about anything we've discussed today?

Appendix B: Collaborator Interview Protocol

2. How do you define family engagement?
3. How long have you been working in [this city's] schools?
4. What changes have you seen in the school - positive or negative - since this fall? When possible, please tell stories that illustrate these changes.
5. What have been some of your strengths/highlights when working with parents this year? What have been some of the challenges working with parents?
6. In what ways do you support teachers to engage families?
 - a. Do teachers come to you for support? Describe.
 - b. What are some the barriers if they don't? What enables them to come to you?
7. How welcome, valued, and respected do teachers make parents feel?
 - a. What expectations do teachers have for parents to be involved in their child's education at home and at school?
 - b. How much do teachers support parents to help their children at home, both academically and socially?
 - c. What type of training and support do teachers need to better engage families? What role might you have in providing ongoing support for them?
8. [*Hand out parent focus group summary*]. Here is the summary from the parent focus groups at your school. Please share your opinions about anything on there. For instance, when parents note positive changes, please tell me why that may be. When parents note challenges, how could those challenges be addressed next year?
9. The goals of the grant are to help parents feel more welcome, valued, and respected; more connected to one another, the school, and the community; and improved their abilities to help their children academically and socially. Have the following activities helped with that? Why or why not? How could these activities be changed to better accomplish the goals?
 - a. Coffee hours
 - b. Parent room
 - c. Parent leaders/volunteers
 - d. PTOs
 - e. Parent Leadership Institute
 - f. Parent College
 - g. Incredible Years Parenting program
 - h. Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management program
10. What would you change about the grant for next year?
 - a. One challenge Collaborators mentioned at the beginning of the year was that communication about dates and times of meetings and information to pass along to parents was unclear. How has that changed or stayed the same?
 - b. What kind of training and/or support do you wish you had for this job?
11. If [this city] could get another \$3 million to improve family engagement, what would you want the money to go towards?
12. Anything else you'd like to comment on about your experience as a Collaborator this year?

Notes

ⁱ The district-operated pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten shared the same principal, despite being housed in separate buildings.