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All Children Are Our Children

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Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. . . . You may give them your love but not your thoughts.

—Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

**A Critical Engagement Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctorate of Education**

In the College of Arts and Sciences
At National-Louis University

By
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DEDICATION

This Critical Engagement Project is dedicated to my daughters, Jadé and Tania, whom I love dearly. To the participants in my study and all parents who are fighting for changes in their children’s school, you are my motivation and source of inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, friends, classmates, coworkers, faculty, committee members and participants for their support and guidance throughout this journey. I could not have done this without you.

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The purpose of the study was to talk to parents who “fight attitudes and perceptions that date back centuries and a school system whose resistance to change is unparalleled” (Fine, 1993, p. 692) and see how they persevere as they try to transform this system. Narrative inquiry, using semi-structured interviews, was used to explore the common characteristics and motivations of parents who are advocating for changes within their children’s school. All the participants in this study were mothers of children enrolled in public schools.

The findings suggest that these women are: (1) influenced by others who have a legacy of advocacy; (2) have a history of volunteerism and activism; (3) are actively involved in traditional forms of parent involvement at their children’s school; (4) are very knowledgeable about the workings of the school system, their rights, and their children’s rights; and (5) possess many leadership traits.

The data also strongly suggest that these women are motivated by a combination of external and internal factors. These parents recognized things were ‘not right’ at their children’s school. They were aware that “better” educational experiences existed at other schools in their district. These parents were also motivated by frustration and lack of trust in the school system and were inspired by the actions of other parent advocates.

Implications for practice include the creation of curricula in adult education programs that will educate parents about the school system, their rights, and various means of advocacy. Recommendations for future research include looking at how children are affected by their parents’ activism.
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WHO am I BECOMING?
PREFACE

Who Am I?

I am a parent, an educator, and a parent advocate. In each of these positions, I always want the best for all involved. As a parent raising two girls alone, I often find myself thinking about all the things I want for my children and all the things I think they need to have a fair chance at life. In my role as an educator, I find myself always questioning what skills my students really need to be successful in future classes and then I try to help them attain them. As a parent advocate, I spend many hours voicing my concerns to the administration of my children’s school. I do so in hopes of creating change that will improve the educational environment. Many times, I find myself advocating for issues that not only affect my children but other children in the school as well. No matter what role I play, I try to consider the needs of others and look for ways to affect change.

I have always been a compassionate person who cares about the inequities and injustices that people face. My commitment to advocacy stems from my childhood. When I was younger, displays of social ills on the nightly news deeply disturbed me, especially when the victims were children. I would think, “What if this was happening to me?” At an early age, I began to realize that children have no voice and no choice about their own lives, circumstances, or environment. They are simply the products and/or victims of the choices that adults make for them.

Who am I? I am a witness, not a bystander. As an educator with ten years’ experience at the elementary and college level, I have witnessed parents accomplish
great tasks and tackle many issues on behalf of their children, such as successfully advocating for new textbooks, enrichment programs, and after-school care. Regrettably, I have also seen many appalling situations remain unchanged in some schools, such as the retention of verbally abusive teachers, bathrooms that are always unsanitary, expired milk served in lunchrooms, and an inadequate number of books in classrooms. Many parents are unaware of the great disparities that exist among schools; and unfortunately, some feel powerless to change the system—the system that they too experienced while growing up.

As a result of having taught children from various socioeconomic backgrounds in both public and private sectors, I am outraged by the conditions some of our children are made to endure in their effort to acquire an education. It is not fair to our children and, from my lens, what is being done to our youth by some school systems is criminal.

Who am I? I am a parent who wants the best for my children. Like most parents, I am concerned about my children’s well-being, especially when they are not with me. Being the overprotective mother I am, I often wish my girls were always with me so that I can protect them, but this is not possible. Like most children, my children attend school for an average of six hours a day. As their parent, I feel it is my responsibility to ensure that the school environment not only stimulates them intellectually but that it is also nurtures and protects them and meets their educational needs. Researchers Ronald Edmonds and Lawrence Lezotte have found that one of the seven characteristics of an effective school is a safe and orderly environment. Furthermore, they believe that the atmosphere should be “free from threat of physical
harm” and “not oppressive” (as cited in Batey, 1996, p. 18). It is every child’s right to receive a quality education within a safe and healthy environment and to be treated with respect and dignity.

Who am I? I am the voice speaking out on behalf of my children. I am a parent who advocates not only for my children but for other children as well. I am a parent seeking change and improvement for the betterment of the education of children. I am a parent who believes change is possible.

What Are My Commitments?

My commitments are to myself, my children, and to other children and parents who are struggling with the bureaucracy of public school systems. I am devoted to my children. I am dedicated to their schooling. I believe education is important for all. I believe it is important for me as a parent to speak on behalf of my children—to speak not only about the injustices they may face, but also about the hopes, dreams, and desires that I have for them. As Stephen Covey (1997) said in his book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families, “Vision is greater than ‘baggage.’ . . . Tapping into this sense of vision gives you the power and the purpose to rise above the baggage and act based on what really matters the most” (p. 72).

I will continue to be vigilant and to advocate persistently for my children. If I don’t, who will? I am committed to fighting to preserve the good things, fighting for change, and fighting for “the cause” alongside other parents. I am committed to seeking change. I am committed to raising issues that affect all children. As the ancient African proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” It takes all of our
efforts to raise children. As a member of the larger community, it is my responsibility to express my concerns and to advocate for the well-being of all children, particularly when I witness the violation of their basic rights. This level of commitment, along with “extra minds, voices, and hands, [is necessary] to ensure the highest quality of learning and enhance the community of caring learners” (Batey, 1996, p. 28).

In addition to these commitments, as an adult educator I am committed to helping other parents realize that their voices needs to be heard and that they, too, possess the power to seek and demand change. I especially want parents to understand they have the responsibility as adults to protect their children and to ensure that their children’s needs are met.

What are my commitments? My commitments are: to advocate for my children, to advocate for other children, to advocate in groups and at the same time be confident to advocate alone. My commitment is to invite other parents on the journey of advocating for their children and other children. I want other parents to recognize the necessity and urgency of advocating. I am committed to helping other parents realize that they can create change, regardless of their education, class or cultural background. “To those who would say, ‘We don’t have time to do these kinds of things!’ I would say, ‘You don’t have time not to!’” (Covey, 1997, p. 162–163). What are my commitments? I am committed to advocacy, as defined by Nancy Ireland (n.d.)
Allow yourself to intervene on your child’s behalf.

Don't be intimidated.

Vocalize your concerns.

Opinions on your child's rights should be stated.

Continue to monitor all aspects of your child's medical and educational needs.

Anticipate resistance while striving for excellence.

Count on your instincts for your child's welfare.

You can make a difference.
Why Am I Interested in This Topic?

In 1998, I began teaching seventh and eighth grades for an urban public school district. This was my first teaching position at a public school. I had previously taught at a parochial school and at an alternative school. During my years at this public school, I had the opportunity to witness first-hand the awesome things that can be accomplished by parents. This school was an extraordinary example of parents and school administrators working together as partners for the betterment of children. Most of the parents were college educated and very familiar with their rights as parents and the obligations the school had to their children. I was not surprised that their students were excelling academically, socially, and emotionally.

These parents accomplished great feats, such as successfully advocating for new textbooks in at least one subject every year at every grade level. They suggested and helped organize events such as themed family nights. In all my teaching career, I had never before encountered a school like this. I remember being stunned at how these parents advocated for their children, others’ children, and for school-wide issues. The parents were not only knowledgeable, but also powerful. They were persistent and refused to be dismissed or intimidated. They demanded change and did whatever they felt necessary to influence administrators to enact change. This was a powerful experience for me.

From the first day my children began attending school, I have been actively involved in their education, as an advocate and in other roles; but it was not until I taught at this particular school that I became aware of how much power I truly possessed as a parent. This was definitely a transformative experience for me. These
parents made me realize that even if the administration was not welcoming, I should continue to fight. They taught me to seek out other channels, use alternative methods, and not give up until my goals were met and my issues were resolved.

I felt fortunate because I never had reason to question my power to affect change. In my daughter’s Head Start program, which is administered by the local public school district, I was accustomed to advocating and was invited, along with other parents, to participate in policymaking and decision making. Parent involvement is a key component in Head Start programs. I sat on many interview panels as a full, participating member and had input on the hiring of teachers and staff. My experiences with my daughter’s Head Start program and my observations at the school at which I taught combined to inspire me. These experiences renewed my faith that positive change is possible within the school system.

Unfortunately, all my experiences with this public school district were not as positive. A few years later, when I requested a transfer to teach at a school closer to my house, I was unaware of what awaited me at the new school. To my amazement, my new school seemed to be the epitome of all that could go wrong.

I clearly remember the first faculty meeting. I should have suspected something was amiss when I was told that meetings at this public school always begin with a group prayer. Historically, there has always been a separation of church and state; however, at this school, there was the sense that things were so dreadful that there was a need for the assistance of a higher power. Immediately after the prayer and introductions, the principal asked if our classrooms were ready for the new school year. I announced that my class still lacked several history and science books. Before
the principal could reply, another teacher told me to consider myself lucky because she did not yet have a complete set of books in any subject matter.

This was just one of numerous examples of the total disregard of the children and their educational rights at this school. Many of the students were performing below grade level. It was not uncommon to see in the same classroom children who were three-to-four years older than their peers because these children could not meet the requirements to advance to the next grade. Somehow, in spite of this, the school was not placed on probation. In actuality, this school was a magnet school. This designation meant that parents who did not live within the school’s boundaries could complete an application (subject to lottery), for their children to attend this school. Many parents were under the impression that because this school was a magnet school their children would receive a quality education and one that was better than their neighborhood school could provide. In reality, the magnet status meant only that the school received additional funding for science, the focus of its magnet program. At the open house later that month, I informed parents of the situation with their children’s books. One parent told me that a book shortage was common at this school and that she suspected this contributed to teachers’ frustration and the high teacher turnover rate. Other than that, not one parent complained. As far as I know, none of my classroom parents ever spoke to school administrators or came to any school meetings to voice their concerns. These parents were accustomed to this treatment and probably did not expect better treatment from the school. By the way, the book shortage was never remedied during my tenure. I was told that it would be too costly to replace the few missing books, especially in light of the fact that the school was
going to order new books the following school year. It is ironic to note that although teachers were appalled by the situation at the school, many of their children attended this school. Fortunately, my daughter was attending a public school in which the children for the most part were performing at grade level. In any case, I was satisfied because the school had a very safe, intimate and nurturing environment. This school did not come without sacrifices; our commute was 30 to 45 minutes each way and the school did not have a gym, library, computer lab or any type of enrichment program. This was the school I felt I had to choose for my daughter because my neighborhood school was even worse off than the school I taught at with their constant gang fights in and around school property.

All these experiences are the reasons the topic of parent advocacy is important to me. I want all children to have the opportunity to experience an educational environment like the public school at which I was first employed. I want parents to realize that better schools are available and that our kids deserve a quality education. According to Polakow (1993), “poor children are, by national and local school district policy, a priori designated as academically at risk because of assumed social and cognitive deficiencies” (as cited in Clark, 1995, p. 309). I want parents to realize that regardless of what the statistics say about our children’s future that we, as parents, have the power to demand change and thus change the statistics.

Parents must be aware that perhaps there are many school administrators who do not care if these statistics continue indefinitely; and often times, those who do care often feel powerless to affect change. It is my hope that by sharing the stories of the
motivation and commonalties of successful parent advocates, other parents will realize the necessity of taking on their role as parent advocates.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Schools must change and in order to change them, parents, a most important stakeholder groups, must have real influence
—Wasley, in Michelle Fine, “[Ap]parent Involvement”

This Critical Engagement Project (CEP) is a narrative inquiry into the common characteristics and motivations of parent advocates. This study is based primarily on interviews of parent advocates who are fighting for changes within their children’s public school for the benefit all children. This first chapter presents the background of the study, the problem guiding the study, and the purpose and questions guiding the study. Next, it describes the study’s significance and contribution to the field of adult education, followed by an overview of the theoretical framework and methodology used. The chapter concludes with a discussion of why I am interested in this topic.

Background

The quality of public school affects each of us—whether or not we have children in these schools. . . . All of us who value community should be active in public school improvement.
—Kelly Allin Butler, in Charles Clark, Parents and Schools

When public education was established in this country, it was envisioned to be an equalizer of opportunity and to serve as a beacon of hope and mobility for the poor and powerless (Noguera, 2003). Mark Twain once said, “The greatness of a nation lies in the strength of its public schools” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2003, p.xi). If this is true, we are doomed. The quality of our public education system in the
United States has deteriorated over the past few decades. Many families have fled the public school system and enrolled their children in private schools, leaving the public schools filled with families who cannot afford alternatives. “Enrollment in U.S. elementary and secondary public schools plummeted from a high of nearly 46 million in 1969 to 39 million in 1985” (Bloom, 1992, p. 54). The National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) reported that in 2003, a mere 34.2 million students were enrolled in our public schools. The conditions of some public school districts are so horrific that one alderman, in reference to the schools in his ward, was quoted as saying “Nobody in his right mind would send [his] kids to public school” (Kozol, 1991, p. 53).

Many public schools have suffered from and continue to face overcrowding, inadequate staffing, and underfunding, even during times of economic growth. According to Kozol (2005), many districts have been subjected to the sharpest cutbacks in resources since World War II. Politicians and the media continuously bombard us with reports on the current crisis our public schools are facing: a decline in reading and math achievements, elimination of music and art programs, and an increase in the number of crimes being committed by students, teachers, and administration. Research shows the “major concerns [at schools] have shifted from chewing gum and running in the halls to drug abuse, teen pregnancy, suicide, rape, and assault” (Covey, 1997, p. 121).

In urban communities, especially where gentrification is rampant, public schools are facing a record number of school closures, high dropout and push-out rates, deplorable building conditions, lack of essential supplies (e.g., textbooks), and a
shortage of qualified, experienced teachers coupled with a high turnover rate of those teachers who do possess the proper credentials. Countless people across this nation have lost confidence in the system’s ability to educate our children. Many people believe that our children are learning less today than they were 40 years ago. Their beliefs are not unfounded. As Kozol (2005) reports, “Nationwide, from 1993 to 2002, the number of high schools graduating less than half their ninth grade class in four years has increased by 75 percent” (p. 282). Public Agenda Executive Director Deborah Wadsworth believes “the problem is that the reform movement has neglected to address the public’s chief’s concern: Are the public schools calm, orderly and purposeful enough for any kind of learning to take place?” (Clark, 1995, overview).

In response to this situation, local and national government agencies have established task forces to investigate the current state of our school system and to make recommendations that will transform the system. In January 2002, President George W. Bush unveiled his infamous educational plan, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB “included strict demands for proof of ‘adequate yearly progress’ in all public schools and [invoked] penalties, such as the loss of federal funds, for schools that did not meet their goals, as measured by their students’ scores on standardized exams” (Kozol, 2005, p. 202–203). As a result, at many schools, principals have mandated that their teachers focus their instruction on reading and math and spend less time on history, science, and other subjects in which schools are not held to stringent test score achievement. Many cities have eliminated recess altogether in their public schools in order to maximize class instruction time (Kozol,
Businesses and corporations insist that they can do a better job of educating our children, which has resulted in a surge in the number of charter schools operated by these entities. Kozol (2005), the author of *Shame of the Nation*, a book that details the conditions of public schools in various states, cautions that “When business and the world of commerce are permitted to invade the precincts of our public schools, not merely in the ancillary and familiar role of civic allies or occasional philanthropists but as participants in the determination of the aims of education and the content of instruction, they bring with them a body of beliefs and biases” (p. 106).

Noguera (2003) believes that “the dearth of good [public] schools is . . . the inevitable byproduct of a system that is almost completely unaccountable to those it serves” (p. 15). If there is any hope for a transformation of our public school system, we must make noise and hold our schools and government accountable. In the words of President George H. Bush, “There will be no renaissance without revolution” (as cited in Kozol, 2005, p. 201). As yet, there has been no effort to build a nationwide, grassroots agenda determined and developed by parents to address the conditions of our public school system (Bloom, 1992).

**The Problem**

If we who are working in these schools don’t advocate for children, then who will?

Duncan Pritchett, in Jonathon Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation*

Parents, a valuable resource in education reform, have been left out of the process. “There is little or no opportunity for parents and others outside the system to
participate equally in discussions about the process of an education which might result in action to change the system” (Moss, 2001, p. 105). Although many school administrators talk about parents being partners, “it is misleading because there is no provision in public education for parents to be enfranchised as partners in the educational process” (Garfunkel, 1986, p. 10). Peter Sword, a social worker for Pitt County, North Carolina, states, “Other than the military, school systems tend to be one of the most autocratic systems we have in this country” (Bradley, 1996, p. 20).

Despite the abundance of research that shows that schools and students benefit from parental involvement and that there is a direct correlation between the amount and level of parent involvement with students’ success, many schools maintain a climate that is not welcoming to parents (Batey, 1996; Fine, 1993).

A number of writers have characterized the relationship between schools and parents as problematic, often citing the organizational structure: The current structure of public schooling does not invite public engagement, but instead reinforces a hierarchical and bureaucratic pattern that gives neither students nor parents an official voice. Instead of opening up and encouraging genuine parental participation, the school structure eliminates anything that might erode the power equilibrium (Fege, 2000, p. 39).

Sarason (1995), author of *Parent Involvement and the Political Principle* writes:

In regard to our schools and parental involvement we are in the Articles of Confederation phase: vested interests understandably intent on maintaining the status quo, a lack of clarity (to be charitable) about means and ends, a surface appearance of unity and hope beneath which is confusion and anger, and an unwillingness or inability to face up to the fact that despite all that has been tried in the post–World War II era to improve our schools, the quality of education, however defined, remains what it has been or is getting worse. If, as I predict and fear, nothing will change or the situation will worsen, then our schools will, like the states under the Articles of Confederation, be prey to “foreign forces,” which in this case will be the larger society saying, “No more. Let the dismantling process begin” (p. 15).
Those schools that do facilitate parental involvement focus almost solely on educator-parent relationships (Sheldon, 2002). Many of these schools “are still dominated by cultures that give parents only marginal roles to play (Lynn, 1997, national effort sect.). These schools do not invite parents to participate in “the critical and serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices” (Fine, 1993, p. 683). Sarason (1995) believes that part of the reason parents are treated this way is because of the assumptions that “parents cannot become more knowledgeable to the point where they have something to contribute to changing and improving the quality of schooling” (p. 53). In addition, these parents are rarely “entitled to strong voices and substantial power in a pluralistic public sphere” (Fine, 1993, p. 685).

Jill Bloom (1992) offers a different perspective and attributes the decline in parental involvement to parents’ misconception of their place in public education. Many parents seem unaware that as adults, parents, and citizens, they have the responsibility to demand change and hold schools accountable for delivering a quality education, not just to their child but to all the children in their school. Public schools are in total shambles; yet, research has shown that parental involvement in public schools is only 22% while it is as high as 54% in private schools (Clark, 1995).

Although many parents have expressed among themselves their deep dissatisfaction with the current state of public schools, they are hesitant to take action and advocate. It is apparent that many feel powerless (Greenwood and Hickman, 1991). “Greene suggests that individuals need to remember that they are free, after all, and that they can choose courses of action, with others, and become moral agents,
in other words, reclaim the public sphere and the true political arena” (Moss, 2001, p. 48).

Public education is not only losing its students but also its supporters. There are many parents, who at one time believed in the public school system because, as graduates of the system they had experienced its benefits first-hand; however, “the trouble is, [many] parents seem unlikely to go to bat for a system that makes them feel like outsiders.” (Bradley, 1996, p. 43). Olivos (2004) believes many parents do have an interest and desire to participate in their children’s school; what they lack is the political consciousness necessary to grasp how the school system implicitly works to discourage the active, authentic, and meaningful environment of parents and communities.

According to Bell, founder of For the People, as the federal government became more involved in education in the late 1950s and ’60s, “the whole mentality of education changed. Experts were called in to intervene, and now parents don’t know what schools are doing” (Clark, 1995, Current situation section). This is believed to be one of the reasons many parents leave the responsibility of taking care of the child solely to the school instead of working in partnership with the schools. Jill Bloom (1992) writes, “When it comes to public education, [the] primal instinct to protect and educate seems to have atrophied over the past few decades. . . . In part it’s because [parents] feel that, once our children are older, we can leave their education to others more suited to the task” (p. 15).

Currently, the problem is that parents are “being thrown into a public sphere of public education that has lost democratic vibrancy, authentic representation,
richness of critique, social legitimacy, and the depth of possibility” (Fine, 1993, p. 706). Recognizing there is a problem is difficult, “because we all have been socialized most effectively to accept the power relationships characteristic of our schools as right, natural, and proper outcomes” (Sarason, 1990, p. 29).

The Purpose of the Study

Those in power must come to care, and those who care must gain power.
—Spring in Michelle Fine, “[Ap]parent Involvement”

“In spite of the recent trend away from public schools, some parents are making the decision to stay and fight—to work harder to make their public schools better.” (Bloom, 1992, p. 239). The purpose of this study was to explore the common characteristics and motivations of mothers who are advocating for public school children who have not been labeled as having special needs. In addition, the cause and source of their continued motivation were explored.

Focus on advocacy should not only imagine large collective wholes, but perhaps most importantly specific context as sites of change and transformation with a broader understanding and interpretations of advocacy as a daily, moment to moment conscious practice (Urrieta, 2004). The parents in this study are advocating for better schools that will provide all children with a quality education in a safe environment that is conducive for learning. Female participants were exclusively sought for my Critical Engagement Project (CEP) because “past research shows that they tend to be more involved than fathers in the academic and intellectual development of their children” (Sheldon, 2002, p. 305).
Questions Guiding the Study

- What are the common characteristics of successful female parent advocates?
- What common experiences and motivations lead mothers to advocate not only for their children but also for other children?
- What keeps these mothers motivated and inspired to advocate for one issue after another?

Significance of the Study

_Noguera (2003) believes the real questions are: Does American society truly value all of its children? Do we care enough to do what it takes to ensure that all children receive a quality education?_

_Pedro Noguera, City Schools and the American Dream_

Our public schools are in state of emergency; our children are in a state of emergency. “Educational data, to the extent that they are even made available to the public, demonstrate unambiguously that our schools are failing most of the nation’s children” (Fine, 1993, p. 707). Despite the current conditions of our public school systems, many parents do not see the need for a call to action. Kozol (1991) writes, “What seems unmistakable . . . is that the nation, for all practice and intent, has turned its back upon the moral implications, if not yet the legal ramifications” (p. 4). Many people believe that true education reform will only happen through a political movement and according to author Gary Orfield, “political movements aren’t so hard to start” (quoted in Kozol, 2005, p. 222).
At present, an overwhelming amount of literature focuses solely on traditional forms of parent involvement. The term parent involvement encompasses activities such as serving as chaperones and class mom and on, planning committees and other decision-making bodies; however, service in this capacity often still means “involvement on institutional terms, and parents sometimes [find] themselves rubber-stamping the school district’s agenda” (Bloom, 1992, p. 2000; see also Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001, Abstract section). Many experts have researched the barriers to and reasons behind the lack of parental involvement in their children’s education. A survey of parent leaders revealed the following reasons for parental non-involvement: feeling they have nothing to contribute, not knowing how to be involved, feeling intimidated, and feeling unwelcomed (as cited in Clark, 1995).

According to Batey (1996), “there is still a lack of knowledge and considerable resistance concerning parent involvement, even after 25 years of research” (p. 45). While the field may be inundated with research on various aspects and forms of parental involvement, the “variables that influence parents’ decisions about becoming involved have been less well examined” (Hoover-Dempsey, Wilkins, Sandler, & O’Connor, 2004, p. 4). There has been relatively little examination of parent advocates, especially those parents who are advocating for children who have not been identified as having special needs. Much of the literature on parent advocacy focuses on advocating for children with special needs (e.g., gifted, learning disabled, and diabetic). Parents of these children tend to be more inclined toward advocacy due to several factors: (1) in the eyes of the law and fellow citizens, their children’s needs appear more evident due to their physical and mental ailments, and (2) their cause is
championed by legislation and thereby ensuring that federal and state funding is available and that information is readily and easily accessible.

Research that looks at parent advocacy is urgently needed. Specifically, there is a need for research that shows what parent advocacy on the local level looks like for children who do not have special needs. Parents’ voices need to be represented in the literature because they offer the educational community a unique and knowledgeable perspective. According to Michael Apple, a good deal of critical work in education seeks to answer the questions: “Whose knowledge and ways of knowing are considered legitimate?” and “Whose voices are heard?” (Cervero, Wilson & Associates, 2001, p. x).

In order to assist parents in becoming activists, we must first understand how parent advocates came to recognize that they themselves are agents of power. It is my hope that by listening to their stories and looking for commonalities other parents will be encouraged and feel empowered to join this journey.

Contributions to Adult Education

No matter what the present mood in Washington is like, no matter what the people who are setting policy today believe, or want us to believe, no matter what the sense of hopelessness that many of us often feel, we can not give up on the struggle.

—Congressman John Lewis in Jonathan Kozol, The Shame of the Nation

According to Stanage (1987), the goal of adult education is to bring about change in knowledge, attitudes, values, or skills of adults. This study contributes to
the field of adult education by sharing and documenting the commonalities that lead adults to become successful parent advocates. Knowledge gained from this study can be used in parent education programs to assist parents in moving along the continuum of adulthood. As adult educators, we can assist parents in acquiring the skills they need to live a socially responsible life as citizens in a democratic society. I hope that with these tools parents will become empowered and will act as change agents on behalf of children. What better way to affect society than by creating positive change that will affect today’s children and tomorrow’s adults.

The following is a pledge, originally written by President Woodrow Wilson, that over 2 million parents signed in November 1995 and that states what our commitments should be as adults. As adult educators, we hope we can get more people to adopt this pledge.

“I am the owner of the public school system; that as an owner, I bear a responsibility to participate in the system; that accountability for my public schools and its employees and its funding rests with me and the rest of the system’s owners; that my child’s future depends on improvement of public education; and that this improvement depends on my participation” (Clark, 1995, Current Situation sect.).

This research adds to the field by providing educators with the means to assist public school administrators in unlearning hegemonic beliefs about parents and to build ideological commitments to advocacy (Bloom, 2001). The results of my study will enable educators to assist parents in becoming “confident, well-informed and
influential people in the education of their children and in the educational life of the community” (Fine, 1993, p. 685). As we assist the public, i.e., parents, in taking back the public sphere, “the question that needs to be pressed is which contexts and practices need to be put in place, or invented, so that diverse counterpublics can engage in critical conversation and common projects. How can a democracy of differences breathe life into educational reform?” (Fine, 1993, p. 705).

Definitions of Main Terms

It is necessary to define the following terms, as they will be used in this paper.

Advocacy

In general, advocacy can be defined as, “An ongoing process aiming at change of attitudes, actions, policies and laws by influencing people and organisations [sic] with power, systems and structures at different levels for the betterment of people affected by the issue” (ICASO 2002, p. 12).

There are many forms of advocacy and advocacy itself can be seen in a variety of shapes. Advocacy can be letter writing, phone calling, boycotts, presenting information, and holding meetings with others. It can last from one hour, to many years, to beyond a lifetime. It “can involve many specific, short-term activities which together combine to reach a long term vision of change” (Covey, 1997; ICASO, 2002; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).
One type of parent involvement, parent advocacy, is a form of activism that can be a form of resistance (Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock & Lecklider, 1999). “A two-part distinction emerges between (a) those parent activities aimed primarily at strengthening the overall school program and only indirectly toward helping the parents’ own child (e.g. advisory, volunteering, fund-raising, and advocacy activities); and (b) those parent activities that involve assisting one’s own child (e.g. helping with homework, meeting with teachers and attending school events)” (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms., 1986, p. 110).

Parent advocacy is not synonymous with parent participation or parent involvement. Parent advocacy has traditionally been defined as the act of speaking and acting in support of the education of one’s own child. For this paper, parent advocacy takes on additional meaning. Parent advocacy also includes seeking systemic change for the betterment of all the children in the school.

A parent advocate is defined as a parent who speaks and acts on behalf of his or her child (Bloom, 1992). This advocate, who in most cases is female, wants her child to have a successful and positive educational experience. She is a full partner in her child’s education and is concerned about her child’s mental, physical, and emotional state while at school. She is concerned about all the factors that affect the school climate such as safety, curriculum, faculty, facilities, etc.
A parent advocate is sometimes reactive, but the main focus is on proactive advocacy. She is concerned about present and future situations. She is persistent in her search to improve identified areas of need. She maintains regular communication with the school, and when appropriate, participates in decision making and on advisory committees. Jill Bloom (1992) labels this type of parent advocate a “case advocate”—one who is advocating specifically for the benefit of one’s child.

The term parent advocate not only possesses all the traits of a parent advocate as previously defined, but also the following:

A parent advocate seeks and demands positive systemic change. She advocates for issues that affect other children. She also invites and encourages other parents to begin advocating and looking at systemic issues. She is committed to advocating with and for other parents who could not or would not be as active. She feels her best when her children and her community are thriving (Fine, 1993). Jill Bloom (1992) refers to this type of advocate as a class advocate and also a system advocate because she is concerned with “representing all children who share similar needs” (p.23–24). The system advocate is also working toward change that is “in the best interests of the entire community of children” (p. 24).

Quality Education

As defined by the students of Lincoln County High School (MEA-MFT, n.d.):

* A school facility that is heated, structurally safe, user friendly, and has enough space to accommodate its students and faculty.

* A faculty that is certified.
* Students who have updated texts and materials and access to extracurricular activities.

**Conclusion**

Raise your voices, even if you should be shouted down. Future generations demand it. . . . Your integrity demands it.

—Thomas Sobol in Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation*

Parents have the responsibility of ensuring that their child has a quality education. Parents, regardless of age, must understand the importance of advocating on behalf of their child. Being a parent comes with tremendous adult responsibility. “Education in the United States is at a crossroads. Success or failure may depend on our ability to join together as partners in reform to ensure success for all children, now and in future generations” (Rutherford, Anderson, Billig, 1995).

Through the field of adult education, parents can learn about their rights and responsibilities, as the key person in their child’s education. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) suggest that once parents realize that participation in their child’s education is a responsibility, they are more likely to become involved. It is my hope that they will also use these skills to make positive contributions to their community and to affect change for the good of their community. “We all need parents to become critical activists in their homes, in their schools, on the streets.” (Fine, 1993, p. 692). It is time that we “reconceptualize a democratic, critical, lively public sphere within public education. And we need to do this with, but not exclusively on the backs of, parents” (Fine, 1993, p. 708).
On a personal note, I hope that through my advocating my children will see me as a model of what they will need to do for themselves. I hope that other children, through seeing their parents advocate, will do the same when they become parents, therefore leading to lasting change that will continue from generation to generation.

Organization of the Critical Engagement Project (CEP)

This study is organized into six chapters. Chapter Two explores relevant literature on advocacy, parental involvement, and activism. Chapter Three details the methodology of this study, including the theoretical framework and design of the study. Chapter Four provides a description of each of the ten participants. In Chapter Five, the findings are presented. The final chapter, Chapter Six, provides the conclusion, implications for practice, and recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to inform the reader of the existing body of literature on parent advocacy—the highest form of parent involvement. In the literature I have read, the themes listed below consistently occur. Looking at these themes is important because all parents have the rights as citizens in a democratic society to hold the public schools, which are partially funded by taxpayer dollars, accountable to deliver to their children, future citizens, a quality education in a safe and nurturing environment.

Schools, government, parent- and community-based organizations, and researchers agree that: (a) public school parents, regardless of socioeconomic status should have equal rights, (b) parents of low socioeconomic status are being oppressed by the school system, (c) parental involvement is key to a child’s success, (d) parents and schools must make a concerted effort to work together, and (e) some school reform must take place. Despite the fact, that (a) schools are in need of much improvement and (b) schools are erecting barriers that deter parents from being involved and advocating, there are parents who feel empowered and entitled to advocate for systemic change for the betterment of children, public schools, and society. These parents are “demanding that the public sphere embrace their concerns—the concerns of the public” (Fine, 1993, p. 699). The goal is to talk to parents who “fight attitudes and perceptions that date back centuries and” [see how they persevere as they try to transform] “a school system whose resistance to change is unparalleled” (p. 692).
The Process

The process of performing a literature review on parent advocacy has been problematic. There is no consensus in the education community on one term to describe the advocacy that takes place for children who have not been categorized as having a disability or special need. Child advocacy, parent advocacy, and educational advocacy are some of the terms that are used. Unfortunately, these terms are not used exclusively to refer to advocacy for school-age children in an educational setting. More often than not, searches using these terms produce literature on advocacy for children with diabetes or physical, mental, or emotional disabilities; human rights issues; children labeled gifted; children of migrant families; and even advocacy for adults.

In my attempt to obtain literature on advocacy as related to my research, I broadened my search and examined parent participation and parent involvement as bodies of literature closely related. Parent participation searches proved to be too broad and resulted in literature on chaperoning field trips, bake sales, and attending family nights. The search on parent involvement produced articles and other sources on school choice, assisting with homework, etc. The term parent involvement sometimes includes committee work, planning committees and participation in other decision-making bodies, but it most often it means “involvement on institutional terms, [where] parents find themselves rubber-stamping the school district’s agenda” (Bloom 1992, p. 200, also stated by Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001, Abstract section).
“The confusion over the meaning of ‘parent involvement’ reflects the conflict of interest inherent in governance structure of public education” (Haar, 1999, Chapter 5). It was when I performed a search on the combination of these terms with educational change, educational reform, school reform, accountability, activism, change agent that I found relevant material. Most of the articles and books; however, focus on the curricular aspect of school reform. I also reviewed literature on political and community activists. When I found resources that were relevant to my topic, I identified the key terms and subjects terms that were used to classify these sources. Unfortunately, there seems to be no agreement on which terms are to be used.

In response to the current condition of our education system, a few parent advocacy organizations have been established, e.g., Parents United for Responsible Education (P.U.R.E), Parents for Public Schools, and Designs for Change. When I contacted individuals from these organizations, they were able to name only one scholar whose focus was on advocacy for all populations: Joyce Epstein.

Epstein has created a model that delineates and defines six types of school, family, and community partnerships: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn & Van Voorhis, 2002). This model is widely known and used by many professionals as a framework for developing action plans and was adopted by the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) for their national standards. Although Epstein’s model includes parent advocacy, it is under the larger category of decision making. In her book, School, Family, and Community Partnerships (2002), Epstein
does not thoroughly discuss decision making, her fifth type of involvement, which includes advocacy, as she did with the other types of involvement.

At present, there is a lack of scholarly information in the field that speaks directly to parents who are advocating for the benefit of all children. I suspect that others in the past have done research on the topic; however, it is difficult to determine how much of this research has ever been published. Whatever has been published is very difficult to locate. In further attempts to locate material that is applicable to my study, I scheduled consultation appointments with librarians whose areas of expertise includes educational research. Even with this additional help, I have been unable to find a substantial amount of information. The lack of information and difficulty in retrieving information on the topic is just one more way to marginalize and silence the voices and positive actions of parents.

Advocacy

Advocacy can be defined as “an ongoing process aiming at change of attitudes, actions, policies and laws by influencing people and organizations with power, systems and structures at different levels for the betterment of people affected by the issue” (International Council of AIDS Service Organizations, 2002, p. 12).

Advocacy and activism are very similar. According to Urrietta Jr. (2004),

Activism in daily life is this “realized” awareness of knowing one’s ability to act critically upon the world with the understanding that there are structural and inherent contradictions that limit this social action. Moving forward with his agenda for change accepts the fact that one person cannot change the world, but that one conscious action at a time can have the potential for societal change (p. 5)
For this paper, I specifically focus on parent advocacy, which, in the research literature, is sometimes referred to as child advocacy and educational advocacy.

Parent advocacy is not synonymous with parent participation or parent involvement. According to Deslandes and Bertrand (2005), “parent advocacy differs from traditional parent involvement in which the how, when, where of the involvement is controlled by the school” (p. 173). Individuals involved in parent advocacy, find themselves creating a personal space to address their issues of concern. Parent advocacy can be defined as:

- The act of speaking and acting on behalf of one’s child’s education. Its goal is to seek change for the betterment of children and their education.
- “standing up for [your] rights as parents to ensure that all children get the best education possible” (Bloom, 1992, p. 23)
- “taking charge of a situation that’s not acceptable and assuming responsibility to create a change” (Bloom, 1992, p. 28).

These definitions assume that children need someone to protect and support them while they are a part of the ‘system’. Although much of the literature focuses on advocacy for gifted children and children with disabilities, advocacy is an issue that is pertinent and relevant to all. “Advocacy is not just for the disenfranchised” (Bloom, 1992, p. 28). Advocacy is about demanding change. It’s about, in terms of my study, fighting for issues such as the reinstatement of recess and ensuring that each child has a textbook. It is also about holding schools accountable for policies that are already in place.
*Why Advocate*

The schools will always be what the people of the community make them  
—Thomas A. Shaheen in Jo Ann Shaheen, *Take Charge!*

Advocacy does not just include advocating for you and yours but also advocating for others. “Children are born into the world as individuals, but according to Arendt (1958), without the capacity to participate in the adult world of speech and action” (Moss, 2001, p. 18). Children need us to advocate for them because, according to Margolis and Salkind, children: have little political power, are more physically and psychologically vulnerable than adults, and do not influence or control the services designed to assist them (as cited in Moss, 2001, p. 117).

In *Its Time to Stand Up for Your Child: Advocating for Your Child’s Education* (1979), Shaheen and Spence cite the following reasons to advocate for issues that will serve the greater good:

- Children need their parents to be their advocates.
- Children need other adult citizens to be their advocates.
- It is in your self-interest to make sure that not only your own but all children grow up to be healthy, productive members of society.
- You gain power over your life and your family’s life at home as well as in school.
- You can begin to address larger social and economic problems affecting your life.
Advocacy is a tool that many use to create, change, and put new procedures and policies into place. It can enlighten decision makers, leaders, policy makers, and others in positions of influence about pressing issues that are affecting the school and the community. Advocacy can bring about systemic change. Advocacy training aims to teach parents to reject, rather than accept, these asymmetries (Harry, 1992, Attitudes and Behaviors of Professional section, ¶4).

According to Jill Bloom (1992), much of our work as advocates can be done within the system as members of steering committees, leadership councils, and planning teams; however, she cautions that it may sometimes be “necessary to work as advocates outside the system, in order to alter the structure so that it becomes more accommodating to the needs of the school community as perceived by parents” (p. 24). Sarason, author of Parent Involvement and the Political Principle (1995), states, “Generally speaking, parent involvement can claim no victories, unless shadow boxing is a victory. There is far more compelling evidence, again from our urban areas, that parental involvement has been productive of conflict, not of a problem-solving process” (p. 13). It is not clear if she is referring to parent involvement, which is very broad and can include things like attendance at school performances and home discussion about the school day, or if she is referring to advocacy. Later, she states that “parent involvement [is] a proved means for improving schools” (p. 53) and when you are affected by decisions that have been or will be made, “you should stand in some relationship to the decision-making process” (p. 7). She further states that she fears that if parents do not make a stand, “the dismantling of our public school system
will pick up steam, a possibility that a disillusioned public will not strongly oppose” (p. 8).

Seeley (1989), in his address to doubters, states that change is possible because it is already happening—“at least at the individual school level” (p. 48). Through advocacy methods, Olivos (2004) suggests, “parents can resist, challenge, and even transform contradictory and oppressive school policies and practices, particularly when accompanied by political consciousness” (p. 25). Jill Bloom (1992), also a supporter of parent advocacy, reminds us “Clearly, parent advocacy doesn’t always work. Parents report efforts that are in vain, ignored, or undone by school administrators” (p. 271). My research examined the motivation of parent advocates and the source of their sustained motivation, especially when past advocacy methods were unsuccessful.

In the literature and in my conversations with parent advocacy organizations, I have learned that the key to successful advocacy is advocating with others because there is power in numbers. “But while broad-based advocacy is important, don’t underestimate the power of one ‘hysterical’ or ‘appropriately aggressive’ parent. A single advocate, working on behalf of a single child, can bring about monumental changes in every public school system in the country” (J. Bloom, 1992, p. 120).

Why Parents?

Parents are the most natural and suitable advocates for children (Moss, 2001; Salon, 2001) and their voices and energy are needed. Creating systemic change in a
school is labor-intensive, requires the sustained effort of many people and is more likely to happen when parents, teachers, administrators, and community members act as change agents (Arriaza, 2004; Giles, 1998).

Most parents are concerned about their children and want what is best for them and more specifically want their children to have a better life than they had (Gordon as cited in Olmsted 1991; see also Roberts & Holt, 1994; Vopat, 1998). Sometimes the only way to achieve that is for parents to speak up and voice their concerns. In an article addressed to parents, Lucy Oriang’ (2001) writes “Protest loud and long when your children are fed beans riddled with weevil. Tomorrow it might be typhoid” (¶16). “The best lessons we can pass on to our children are the ones we teach them by example. Our advocacy efforts are a great lesson in hard work and caring, and we must never forget that how we go about advocating teaches our children as much as what we advocate for” (Bloom, 1992, p. 277).

In agreement with Moss (2001), Friesen and Huff (1990) write, “parents have the social and legal responsibility, as well as an emotional investment in their children’s welfare, that is far beyond that which can be hired” (p. 31). “No institution can fill the place of parents when it comes to loving their children, knowing their children, and wanting what is best for their children” (Russell, 2001, p. 31). There is no better advocate for children than their parents or guardians. “After all, parents are the major stakeholders in their children’s education” (Batey, 1996, p. xiii). “Parents are persuasive advocates because they have . . . ‘a consumer’s-eye’ view of the service system that . . . policy makers can relate to and understand (Friesen & Huff,
Parents have a vested interest, their children (Batey, 1996; Moss, 2001; Sarason, 1995).

It has been proven that “some of the most powerful advocacy methods are led by the people affected by the problem” (ICASO, 2002, p. 11) and “are key to crafting adequate solutions” (Fine, 1993, p. 703). “Kevin Walker, president of Project Appleseed believes the grassroots approach is needed because everyone else in the movement is trying to put parents to work to support what the school says it needs” (Clark, 1995, Current situation section, para. 8). In a poll, when the general public was asked whom they trusted to make decisions about how public schools in their community should be run, their number one answer was “parent,” ranking higher than teachers, principals, education experts, and elected officials. (“First Things First,” 1994, as cited in Clark, 1995).

Regardless of their socioeconomic class or level of education, all parents have something to contribute to the discourse that is or should be happening in the school. According to Grantham, Frasier, Roberts, & Bridges (2005), “parents are the key persons who can raise issues” (p. 144). The authors go on to say that “parents are often free of the institutional and legal constraints that may limit the ability of other stakeholders to advocate for causes that would most benefit . . . students” (Grantham, et al., 2005, 146; see also Moss, 2001). In agreement, Sarason (1995) writes that even when educators recognize there is a problem in the decision-making process, often they will not voice their opinions in a public forum.

National Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the United States, states on its Website, “there are more
child-related issues [to advocate for] than a PTA can effectively address” In agreement, Batey (1996) states, “not one of us is capable of doing all the work that needs to be done to make the world better for our children” (p. 71). These statements underscore the fact that we as parents cannot solely depend on others to advocate for their children. Parents must do this themselves. Jill Bloom (1992) believes, “As leaders of education reform on the home front and in the national arena, parents will have an inestimable impact in coming years” (p. 272).

The Goal of Public Schools

To ensure that the rights of all, including parents and children are guaranteed, we need a public realm where natality and plurality are recognized as the cornerstones of a democratic society and in which education is the key to preparation to participate in that democratic society.

—John Moss, Parent Advocacy

Public Agenda Executive Director Deborah Wadsworth believes that “the problem is that the reform movement has neglected to address the public’s chief’s concern: Are the public schools calm, orderly and purposeful enough for any kind of learning to take place?” (cited in Clark, 1995, Overview section, para. 31). Public schools have a certain responsibility to their constituents. Clark argues, that “the equitable distribution of public resources for the education of all children seems only just if the issue is approached not from an institutional perspective, but from the perspective that all children are part of the ‘public’ served by our educational institution, and that all families contribute to those public resources through their tax dollars” (Current section).
Shaheen and Spence (2002) state that “the school lives fairness, because this is the key issue in maintaining and improving our American Democracy” (p. 17). They further state that “Americans will blossom with truth, beauty and goodness only when our children learn and live in just schools” (p. 17) and that if we educate only select children, we are placing the entire country in jeopardy. Education and democracy go hand-in-hand, and Walter Feinberg (1990) states that “the role of public education is to create and recreate a public by giving voice to an otherwise inarticulate, uniformed mass” (p. 181). “Public education will be the most vital when developed and supported through effective community action (Oberholtzer, 1954, p.58 as cited in Heffner, 1976).

Kelly Allin Butler, President of Parents for Public Schools, asks, “Has sacrifice for the common good been replaced by survival of the fittest?” He continues, “The quality of public schools affects each of us—whether or not we have children in these schools. All of us who own property, who need skillful workers, who want quality products, who want productive citizens. All of us who value community should be active in public school improvement” (cited in Clark, 1995, Current Situation Section, para. 6).

“Public education in America is in the most fundamental sense a public issue. Schools will not change because leaders want them to. They will change when parents, students and teachers go about their daily activities in different ways. That will only happen when the public is considered an equal and respected partner in reform—one whose views are worth listening to. (Shaheen & Spence, 2002, p. 39).
Timeline of Significant Parent Advocacy Events

1897  The history of parent involvement and advocacy can be traced back to 1897 when the National Congress of Mothers formed in Washington, D.C. The group’s slogan was “All children are our children”. With Theodore Roosevelt, serving on its board of directors, the group mobilized parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds to volunteer and advocate at their local school.

1912  In a federal education report, a school superintendent commented, “We cannot expect the highest good in municipal or state government until public opinion demands it” (Clark, 1995, Background section, para. 4).

1926  Selena Sloan Butler of Atlanta, Georgia, founded the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. This organization “worked primarily in rural areas, where school issues included efforts to assure clean drinking water and adequate sewage treatment” (Clark, 1995, Background section, para. 5).

1950s  “[A] small group of parents met and formed the National Association for Retarded Children (NARC). Their goal was to exert pressure to provide more and better resources for their children in the public schools where those children were well below first-class citizens . . . in schools” (Sarason, 1995, p. 36).
The first active intervention in parent involvement by the federal government came with the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Title I of ESEA was created to empower poor communities to solve their own problems (Rutherford, Anderson, Billig, 1995).

The National Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) was established. Parent involvement has been an issue for many presidents (specifically, Lyndon Johnson, Woodrow Wilson, and Bill Clinton) and has been part of much education legislation, such as the Elementary and Secondary School Act.

Although the landmark 1983 federal report *A Nation at Risk* (as cited in Clark, 1995, Collecting Research section), devoted only one paragraph to parental involvement, it stated:

> You have the right to demand for your children the best our schools and colleges can provide. Your vigilance and your refusal to be satisfied with less than the best are the imperative first step. . . . But . . . you bear a responsibility to participate actively in your child’s education (para 4).

“Congress began requiring all schools that receive federal Title I money to develop a plan ‘that outlines how parents, the entire school staff and students will share the responsibility for improved student achievement, and the means by which the school and parents will build and develop a partnership to help children achieve the state’s high standards’” (Lynn, 1997, ¶7). “In March 1994, . . . Congress passed the Goals 2000 education-standards legislation with a parental involvement component. It read: ‘Every school will promote
partnerships that will increase parental involvement . . . and parents and families will help to ensure that schools are adequately supported and will hold schools and teachers to high accountability” (Clark, 1995, A New Collaboration section, para. 4).

1995 The National PTA urged Congress “to include parental involvement provisions in all legislation pertaining to children’s education and development” (Clark, 1995, current situations sect.).

Power
Education is a process operating through relationships, which cannot be neutralized or obliterated to allow equal distribution of the social good at their core.

—Royal W. Connell, *Schools and Social Justice*

In order to understand advocacy as a form of resistance, Olivos (2004) states that we must also understand domination; “specifically, the notion that domination is not absolute or that it does not function unchallenged. Rather, domination is partial and dialectical.”(p. 31).

Power is central and key (see J. Bloom, 1992; Harry, 1992; Moss, 2001) to any discussion about parents and the public school system, which in itself makes it “a situation conducive to a nonproductive struggle” (Sarason, 1995, p. 55). “The 1954 [Brown v. Board of Education] decision started a train of events in the center of which was the issue of power—who had it and abused it, who should have it but did not” (p. 21–22). Sarason continues, “If anything was clear in those days—and few things were clear—it was that these institutions were being accused of aggrandizing
power, unilateral, authoritarian decision making and a gross insensitivity to the needs and rights of society in general and their different constituencies in particular” (p. 21). Many of today’s institutions can be described by these same words.

According to Sarason (1995), because of the media’s role, many people know more about how and why the federal government operates than it does about a school or school system. Those who have power within the school system do not do an adequate job of informing their parents, who are also constituents, about decisions being made that will affect parents, their children, and their community.

Instead, many schools abuse their power by “using all the power that comes from having more cultural, social, and class capital [to define] the interactions in ways that distinctly disadvantaged the already disadvantaged” (Bloom, 2001, p. 304). In an article about participation of African-American parents in special education, Beth Harry (1992) states “professional educators . . . have cast parents in the role of consent-giver in a grossly asymmetrical form of discourse, with power residing mostly with professionals” ([¶1] (see also Lingbeck, 1998). In Michael Berger’s model of the school community, parents are at the bottom of the pyramid, representing the group with the least power, while at the same time, representing the greatest in quantity and the foundation of the system (Bloom, 1992, p. 57). To some, this relationship between schools and parents exists not only to keep parents out of genuine participation in the decision-making process but also to maintain the status quo (Green, 1989, see also Lingbeck, 1998; Sarason, 1995; Moss, 2001).

Schools officials use language and other methods of obfuscation to erect barriers so that parents become fearful. Administrators often present negative
information in a way that only the most highly educated parents can understand, even though the information is crucial to parents’ meaningful involvement in school change (Giles, 1998). Many parents let their feelings of intimidation prevent them from questioning, getting involved, or advocating. According to Lareau (1989), these feelings are greater for parents of low income . . . because these factors are shown to limit parents’ ability to be influential in school systems (as cited in Harry, 1992). Despite these and other research findings, many professionals are unwilling to change their beliefs or actions toward parents. Harry believes that if parents would step into the role of advocacy, in conjunction with other roles, the balance of power in parent-professional discourse would be restored. Whether or not that balance between parents and school professionals ever existed is debatable.

In her article, “Democracy Is Not Always Convenient,” Deborah Meier (1995) reminds schools that they “remain powerful institutions, marking children with their implicit values” (p. 35). These institutions also mark parents with implicit values about themselves and their family by treating them as second-class citizens. According to Merriam (2002), “Power in combination with hegemonic social structures results in the marginalization and oppression of those without power” (p. 328).

Marginalization

“Parents care tremendously about choosing an educational setting best suited for their children’s needs” (Russell, 2001, p. 30). Parents want to be involved, to sit at the decision-making table with educators. Parents want to be involved before policies
are made (Batey, 1996). Many parents join organizations like the National PTA, Parents United for Responsible Education (P.U.R.E.), and Parents for Public School with the goal of advocating and making positive changes. . . . Money is often equated with power, and, unfortunately, parent organizations are often financially dependent on the very systems that need to be changed (Friesen & Huff, 1990).

Education professionals often view parents as deficits, having nothing to contribute in the areas of ideas, knowledge, or experience. “Far too many teachers use the label ‘parent’ frequently as a put down, especially in these days when parents and others seek a role in educational decision making” (Sarason, 1995, p. 45–46). When parents are viewed negatively, with little or no expectations of them, they are relegated to the role of marginal players (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

It is not surprising that many educators do not acknowledge that some parents are themselves education professional. “Chavkin and Williams (1988) surveyed teachers’ educators, teachers, parents, administrators, and school board members in six states in the South and Southwest. . . . Only 37% [of teacher educators] devoted one class period to parental involvement” (cited in Greenwood & Hickman, 1991, p. 280).

Often, one’s socioeconomic class is equated with one’s intelligence and knowledge. Because of the implicit assumption that parents who are not involved lack skills, many parents are discouraged—sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally—from playing a greater role in learning activities or governance (Lynn, 1997; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). Michael Katz states “The failure of public institutions spreads beyond the ‘underclass’ or very poor. Because it
touches all Americans, institutional failure represents one more link between the ‘underclass’ and the rest of America. Only, it impacts poor people with greater force because they lack alternatives” (as cited in Fine 1993, p. 707).

“Oftentimes, parents are regarded by school officials as adversaries instead of supporters of their children’s education” (Bryan 2005, p. 219). Out of nine reports from national commissions that sought answers to our education problems, not one mentioned parents in a leadership role. Jill Bloom (1992) writes, “That’s not surprising, since the nine major reports, written with the expertise of more than four hundred professional educators, businesspeople . . . had not one parent serving on any of the commissions in a position of leadership” (p. 31–32).

Parents do not speak on many issues for various reasons. Greene suggests that, “for too many individuals in society, there is a feeling of being dominated and that feelings of powerlessness are almost inescapable (Greene, 1978 as cited in Moss, 2001, p. 48). Parents sometimes lack confidence because they are aware that they are uninformed about the school and its processes. This lack of information is due to the administration’s failure to share pertinent information, or, when shared, to present it in an understandable format (Friesen & Huff 1990). Many times, parents are not given a forum in which they are allowed to share their ideas, opinions, and proposals. The voices, especially those of “nonadvantaged families—the rural and urban poor, and minorities” (Bloom, 1992, p. 4–5) are often silenced or otherwise go unheard.

Advocating is an essential role for parents because it is one way to address the imbalance of power and control in the public system (Moss, 2001, p. 27).
Positives of Parent Involvement

Although many researchers (Clark, 1995; Jenkinson, 1993; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Lynn, 1997; Olmsted, 1991,) have discovered that children’s success rate increases when both the school and family are involved, Batey (1996) the National PTA (2000), and Olmsted (1991) are among the few researchers who have investigated parent involvement and its positive effect on parents. Both Batey and Olmsted agree that when parents are part of the information-sharing and policy decision-making process, parents display a higher level of commitment and involvement. Olmsted found that these parents demonstrate the ability to be effective advocates for their children. The National PTA (2000) reports that these parents also benefit from involvement in their children’s education “by a heightened sense of confidence, better decision making and problem solving skills and improved self-esteem” (13). As parents engage in “a process of self-affirming activism they developed their own voice as effective organizers in the school community, learning and sharing valuable lessons on commitment, community organizing, participation and decision-making” (Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004, p. 40).

Parents often become empowered as they acquire the knowledge and confidence necessary for more advanced forms of involvement (see Bryan, 2005; Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock, & Lecklider (1999); the National PTA Website) and “through the self-actualizing nature of contributing to the growth and welfare of other”. For Cruickshank (1999), empowerment begins when participants “change their ideas about the causes of their powerlessness, when they recognize the systemic forces that oppresses them and act to change the condition of their lives, . . .
Empowerment has three main components: consciousness, knowledge and action, all involving the transition from “powerlessness to full citizenship, from subjection to subjectivity” (p. 70). Knowing that parents can and do benefit from involvement, my study explored the events and motivations that led parents to become advocates.

*Parents Role and Responsibility*

As adults and citizens in a democratic society, parents have specific roles to fulfill and responsibilities to meet. According to Jill Bloom (1992), Sarason (1995), and Shaheen and Spence (2002), parents not only have the right, but more importantly the responsibility, to hold public schools accountable. Sarason cautiously warns, “It could be arguable that where everyone is accountable no one is accountable” (p. 62). Jill Bloom states, “We have responsibilities not just to our own public school children, but also as overseers of our public education systems” (p. 44). She adds that when we recognize that the school is not meeting our needs we also have the responsibility to take action (p. 44).

According to the Shaheen and Spence (2002), authors of *Take Charge!, Advocating for Your Child’s Education*, “parents must consciously decide what it is that their child must have to become educated within our democracy and global world” (p. 17). The authors also state, “In order for children to meet the intellectual demands of school, their basic health essentials [at school] must be met” (p. 34). These essentials include being in a safe (physical and emotional) environment while in school. As Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Human Needs* (1943) demonstrates, one must first meet the survival needs before moving on to the intellectual needs.
According to Deslandes and Bertrand (2005), “Parents must understand their roles because that understanding identifies the activities that they believe are necessary and part of their responsibilities as parents” (p. 165). “As a member of the school community, it is not enough to guard only your own child’s sustenance needs. It is critical that you also become an active member of the school’s parent organization, so that you can assist in supporting the basic Health Essentials of all students” (Shaheen & Spence, 2002, p. 68). “It is only when responsible parents and educators insist on a school environment healthy for children that school politics and powerful self-interest are rendered impotent in decision-making” (Shaheen & Spence, 2002, p. 39)

Jill Bloom (1992) writes, “We must become activists, advocates, and innovators of a system in crisis. We must find ways to create real change in our children’s schools. . . . She also states, [I]t is up to us as parents to act—to stop dwelling on the damage and pointing the finger, and to start coming up with some real solutions of our own. If we don’t who will?” (p. 8).

In the conclusion of her book, Jill Bloom (1992) writes about one last responsibility: “Parents who have advocacy skills need to extend their skills to parents who do not” (p. 278). It is my hope that through the stories my subjects share, they, too, will extend their skills to others.

Despite the extensive research substantiating the importance, need, and responsibility for parents to advocate for a better public education system, there is very little literature on parents who are advocating. The dearth of literature on parents who are working as agents of change for school reform would lead one to believe that
parents are not advocating. Knowing the barriers to parent involvement and the widely recognized marginalization of parents, I sought in my study to explore the motivations of parents who are, in fact, activists and advocates for children.

Motivation

The injustices are evident. Yet, why does it appear that only a small number of Latino parents openly question the injustices found in the U.S. public school system—a system which has historically failed their children in disproportionate numbers—and why does it seem that even fewer Latino parents openly challenge it?

—Edward Olivos, *Tensions, Contradictions, and Resistance*

Although Olivos speaks only about Latinos in this quote, there are many parents of various ethnicities and social classes whose families suffered and suffer from the injustices of the U.S. public school system and yet do not challenge the system. My study does not attempt to explore the reasons parents do not challenge the system; rather it investigates the motivations of those who are challenging the system through advocacy.

The purpose of this section is to inform the reader of what the literature currently states about the motivation of parent advocates. Because of the paucity of literature that speaks directly to the motivation of parent advocates, I reviewed studies that researched the motivation of parent involvement and also the motivation of community and political activists.

Parent advocates are activists; and as activists, these parents seek change in the public school system. They attempt to replace the inequalities they have seen and experienced with justice and peace, much like political, social, and community
activists. Social activism, like parent advocacy, “is often used to refer to activities that are aimed at changing or reforming society rather than to activities that focus on helping individuals” (Faver, 2001, p. 319). Parent advocacy for the improvement of public education is closely related to political and community activism.

Motivation of Parent Advocates

The literature gives several reasons for the motivations. Some are the opinions of the authors while others are the result of studies. The causes of parent advocacy can be grouped into two categories: external factors and internal factors. Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) and Ayalew (2005) warn the reader to keep in mind that parents invest differently in their “children’s human capital” (Ayalew, 2005, Intro section) sometimes depending on the child’s characteristics. So while parents may advocate about an issue affecting one of their children and their school, they may not do the same for the other child.

External Factors

Talking to other parents, I realized my situation was not unique. That’s what ignited my interest and later involvement in the struggle for school change. —Arturo Estrada in Gilberto Arriaza, Making Changes that Stay Made

Many parents not only advocate because of the realization that a significant number of other children are in the same situation (Arriaza, 2004; Salon, 2001), but also because of external factors that have influenced them, such as the environment, school system, and others. It is believed that parent advocates may have initially been motivated by resolving a personal problem and then recognized that there is a larger,
related problem that remains unsolved (Bloom, 1992; Moss, 2001). “[T]hey may use the impetus of their own case advocacy to stir other parents to action . . . moving from case advocacy to class advocacy” (Bloom, 1992, p. 101), thus creating another motivation for advocacy: being persuaded or invited by others to join the cause and journey.

In a qualitative study examining the responses of 770 parents of adolescents in secondary school (synonymous to middle school) in Quebec, researchers Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) found that “parents became involved if they perceived that teachers and students expected or desired their involvement” (p. 164). Participation in civic activities, like holding the public school system accountable, has been found to increase for parents as they develop connections and relationships with others through their memberships in community and formal groups and organizations, such as the PTA, little league baseball, and bilingual committees (Putnem, 2000, as cited in Arriaza 2004).

Internal Factors

While some researchers believe external factors are the cause of motivations, other researchers cite internal reasons like confidence level as a reason parents do or do not advocate (Friesen & Huff, 1990). Many others have used Bandura’s self-efficacy theory to explain the reasons and motivations behind parents’ participation in advocacy (Deslandes and Bertrand, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock, & Lecklider, 1999).
Bandura’s self-efficacy theory suggests that people must first believe in themselves as individuals capable of producing the desired effect in their lives. In this case, the desired effect is change within their children’s school. According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy of parents and people in general can be developed through four main sources: (1) as a result of a setback and successful experiences, (2) seeing similar individuals model their efforts and succeed, (3) being persuaded by others that they have the capabilities to take on the task at hand, and (4) reduction of stress reactions and alteration of negative proclivities and misinterpretations of physical states (Source of self-efficacy).

Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) concur, “the stronger the self-efficacy the more persistence parents exhibit in their involvement” (p. 165). Nassi and Abramowitz (1980) found that activists who believed “in their ability to influence political events” engaged in greater political activity (p. 364). These findings are similar to self-efficacy and compatible with Social Learning Theory, which posits that high expectations of one’s efforts has an impact and increases the likelihood of engaging in change activities (Nassi and Abramowitz, 1980). In addition, Shepard and Rose (1995) and Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock, and Lecklider (1999) believe that advocating requires parents to have “an ever evolving sense of purpose and responsibility to the larger social milieu as well as one’s own family (Shepard & Rose, 1995, p. 377).

Researchers have found that parents’ perception of their role in the school community was the number one predictor of parent involvement (Reed, Jones, Walker, and Hoover-Dempsey, 2000 as cited in Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005).
“Psychological and sociological literature suggests that individuals’ understanding of their roles is essential to the productive functioning of the groups to which they belong” (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2004, p. 4). Parents who believed it was their responsibility to be involved were more likely to be involved. Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) also write that parents are more likely to be involved “if they believe their action will improve learning and academic performance” (p. 165). In addition, when researching why parents become involved in their child’s education, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) found three major constructs to be central: (1) development of parental role construction that included involvement, (2) positive self-efficacy for helping children succeed in school, and (3) invitations for involvement from their children’s school. In 2005, these researchers added life-context variables (i.e., skills, knowledge, time, and energy) to these constructs (Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005).

In a study by Salon (2001), parents reported working tirelessly on activities because it gave them a sense of purpose, and working for the betterment of others helped them counterbalance the feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and guilt that they felt in their own child’s situation.

Only two researchers, Salon (2001) and Arriaza (2004), cited anger as a motivation of parents who advocated. Salon, who researched the motivation of parent advocates for children labeled as retarded (term used in her text), found that these parents were motivated by the aforementioned factors, as well as by the breadth of issues they embraced and the realization that whatever benefits the advocates’ child would benefit all the children.
Motivation of Political and Community Activists

‘Because a better world is possible’ is the core belief that motivates, structures, and inspires political activism (Chandler & Jones, 2003, p. 75). In analyzing the interviews of fifty women who were working for social change as professionals or volunteers, Catherine Faver (2001) found three motivations for their activism:

1. “to ensure rights: the right to respect and dignity, the right to have basic needs met, the right to equal opportunity and the right to self-determination” (p. 322)

2. “to fulfill responsibilities: responsibility to take care of people and the natural environment, responsibility to pass on what one has received and responsibility to reduce unfair advantage and redistribute power and resources more equitably” (p. 324)

3. “to restore relationships and build community: meeting mutual needs in community, linking the privileged and the dispossessed and fostering an awareness of human interdependence”. (p. 327)

Additionally, Spickard (n.d.), found the following four categories as a source of motivation for activists. He notes that activists can be simultaneously motivated by more than one of these.

1. Teleological/utilitarian: motivated by achieving some goal

2. Deontological: motivated because the action is morally right
3. Cathekontic: motivated out of a sense of responsibility to the community to which one is a part—“One acts because one has certain ties to one’s fellow beings. One may consider outcomes—for the community, not for oneself” (Three Types of Motives section)

4. Charismatic: Combines an affective element with a sense of calling

Solorzano and Bernal (2001), who examined the activism of Chicana/Chicano student activists, found that many of the students’ activism “stems from their roots and their own family and personal histories” (p. 322). Many of his research participants shared stories of how active their parents are in the community. These students also identified other individuals who inspired them to be concerned with social justice issues in their school and community.

**Sustained Efforts**

One wonders what keeps these parents motivated, even after unsuccessful advocacy methods and the realization that their children will no longer be in the school system before the changes for which they fought materialize. According to researchers, it is the support of and relationships with other activists, family, friends that help sustain their motivation (Arriaza, 2004; Faver, 2001; Salon, 2001). It is because of these communities of support that individuals are hopeful of change in the future. Arriaza (2004) believes that it is “the hope that augmented with every small change the system conceded [that] provided enough fuel to keep them [parent advocates] going” (p. 21). Respondents in several studies reported that they felt
supported and sustained by the pervasive sense of sacred presences (Faver, 2001; see also Chandler & Jones, 2003).

As mentioned by the parents of La Famila School and parents belonging to the NYSARC (New York State Association for Retarded Children), experiencing success (and the recognition) as a result of their advocacy efforts is a key source of continuing motivation (Jasis & Ordóñez-Jasis, 2004; Salon, 2001). In my study, parents shared how they remain motivated and maintained their energy even when their efforts are not successful, and instead, as parents reported, are in vain, ignored, or undone by school administrators (Bloom, 1992, p. 271).

**Characteristics**

Not only is it important to understand what motivates parents to advocate, but it is equally important to understand what type of person advocates. According to DiRenzo (1978), personality structure is a dynamic element that not only facilitates social change but also may serve to impede it. In this section, I reviewed the literature on the characteristics of political and community activists. Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis (2004) write, “The examination of a community’s engagement in the politics of public schooling often involves a larger discussion of political participation” (p. 34). This section also looks at the characteristics of parent advocates; however, Jasis and Ordóñez-Jasis looked at advocacy through a specific lens: advocacy for gifted students, students with disabilities, and non-native students… The literature primarily discusses the reasons for parental non-involvement in terms defined by the school. This type of research is deficit-driven.
Research has found that those who engage in activism are:

- Dogmatic individuals
- High Need to Evaluate (HNE). “Need to evaluate (NE) is a personality trait that reflects a person’s proclivity to create and hold attitudes” (Bizer, et al., 2004, p. 996). Because “HNE people are especially likely to evaluate objects in their environment as good or bad, then they may be particularly likely to respond emotionally to the information they encounter” (p. 1017). One’s NE may change over one’s lifetime.
- Dedicated to justice (Chandler & Jones, 2003; Romo, 2004)
- Endowed with a strong sense of self
- Ethical caring: a commitment to care for others (Faver, 2001, Chandler & Jones, 2003; Spickard, 1998 as cited in Faver, 2001)
- Experiencing greater frustration in their personal lives (Nassi & Abramowitz, 1980)
- Goal (focusing on results) and value oriented (focusing on following a moral rule) (Spickard, 1998 as cited in Faver, 2001)

Additionally, Romo (2004), who researched Chicano activists, writes that “Activists appear to embody particular knowledge base, dispositions, and skills related to promoting equity, inclusion and social change” (p. 105). He also states, “Effective activists understand that knowledge itself is political and not neutral, and that schools are a central arena of struggle, resistance, and transformation” (p. 108).
The literature that deals directly with parents finds that parents who advocate are:

- Effective problem solvers who are able to seek out and utilize knowledge and resources and have productive interactions with others (Swick & Graves as cited in Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock, Lecklider, 1999, p. 62; Salon, 2001).
- Well educated and do not work outside the home (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Moss, 2001).
- Prone to feelings of helplessness as they struggled with issues affecting their children’s education (Moss, p. 138; Salon, 2001, p. 291).
- Endowed with a well-developed sense of social justice—the idea of doing something when you notice things are not right (Chandler & Jones, 2003), similar to the aforementioned Spickard’s (1998) definition of goal-oriented.

Salon (2001), in her examination of parent advocates who were fighting the public school system on behalf of their “retarded” children, found the following themes characterized these advocates:
Highly committed to supporting other parents

Experienced isolation, loneliness, prejudice and misunderstanding

Began speaking publicly, providing parent-to-parent assistance. Some became paid professionals.

Refused to believe that the overall situation in terms of the future of the system and for other children was hopeless

Became experts and were recognized for their expertise

“They all experienced a feeling of personal growth, a sense of power and control, feeling stronger, feeling smarter, acknowledging their own resilience, feeling confident, expressing satisfaction, and pride in their accomplishment” (p. 292).

Conclusion

Although there is an abundance of literature that speaks to the benefit of parent participation and parent involvement, Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) state that “educators still know little about what factors lead parents to decide to become involved in their adolescents’ schooling” (p. 164). Because the definition of parent involvement only includes traditional forms of parent involvement, Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha (2001) call for a redefinition of parental involvement and a restructuring of parental education programs. Little has been written about the specific topic of parent advocacy and hardly any research has been done. In 1996, Margolis and Salkind wrote that the role of parents as individual advocates for their
children has remained largely unexplored. Over ten years later, this research area still remains uncharted territory.

Advocacy, an act that in itself is empowering, is about speaking for oneself and others. Currently, the majority of the literature written about parent advocacy looks at advocacy through very specific lenses: advocacy for the gifted, advocacy for students with disabilities, advocacy for non-native English speakers (Moss, 2001). Current literature falls into two general categories: literature on how to advocate and the benefits of advocacy. Literature that addresses advocacy for all populations is most often written from an authoritative point of view: an educational administrator writing how to do it and its benefits. Lingbeck (1998) writes, “Dominant discourse surrounding parent advocacy is generally created by the intellectuals for the disadvantaged” (p. 61). What is clear in the literature is that most of the time parents and activists are motivated by a myriad of factors, both internal and external.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will: (1) present a brief description of the purpose of my study, along with the questions guiding my study; (2) discuss Critical Theory, the theoretical framework undergirding my study; (3) describe and explain the rationale of my use of qualitative research and narrative inquiry, the paradigm and research method I used; and (4) discuss my research design: the participant selection criteria, the data collection methods, and analysis procedures.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to explore the common characteristics and motivations of parent advocates who have children in the public school system. In this study, I also sought to discover what keeps these parents motivated over a long period of time. My study examined the various power dynamics and other issues surrounding power that come into play when parents advocate.

Questions Guiding the Study

- What are the common characteristics and personality traits of successful parent advocates?
- What common experiences and motivations lead parents to advocate not only for their children but also for other children?
• What keeps these parents motivated and inspired to advocate for one issue after another?

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Foucault (1980), a central task of theory is “to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, to locate the connections and extensions, to build little by little a strategic knowledge *savaior*” (p. 145). My theoretical framework served as a guide to my research and as a guide for further discussions of my study.

Critical Theory, is explicitly political in character and is the theoretical framework for my study. It is the perfect framework for my study because “it keeps alive the hope that the world can be changed to make it fairer and more compassionate” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 9). This theory is grounded in an activist desire to fight oppression and injustices. Although many have criticized Critical Theory for being oppressive, and “reproducing a culture of silence” through its “technical jargon, obscure references, and ambiguous phrasing” (Pietrykowski, 1996, p. 84).

My Critical Engagement Project (CEP) is about parents who have the hope and belief that they can bring about change, on some level, within the public schools. My CEP sought to explore and understand what motivates parents to not only challenge the assumptions and structures of an urban public school system that oppresses them and their children, but also to take action and seek change. My study also gives voice to my participants, whose perspectives have been marginalized and largely ignored in the literature.
What is Critical Theory?

Critical Theory is not merely descriptive, it is a way to investigate social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can in turn, inform political action aimed at emancipation (or at least at diminishing domination and inequality).


Horkheimer (1986) defines Critical Theory as a theory that is critical to the extent that it “seeks human emancipation to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (p. 246). Critical Theory is concerned with critiquing capitalism and working toward the emancipation of human beings with the ultimate goal of forming a rational, just, and humane society. Stephen Brookfield, in his book, *The Power of Critical Theory* (2005), lists the following five distinctive characteristics of Critical Theory: (pp.23–29)

1. Critical Theory is firmly grounded in a particular political analysis.
2. Critical Theory is concerned with providing people with knowledge and understandings intended to free them from oppression.
3. Critical Theory breaks down the separation of subject and object. The validity of critical theory derives partly from the fact that its subjects—human beings, specifically those diminished by the workings of capitalism—support the philosophical vision of society inherent within the theory.
4. Critical Theory is normatively grounded. It criticizes current society and also envisions, a fairer, less alienated, more democratic world.
5. The verification of this theory is impossible until the social vision it inspires is realized.

Critical Theory Origins

Critical Theory is the result of centuries of great thinkers each adding their own layers of critical reflection and ideas to this theory. Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) “critical philosophy in which the term critique meant philosophical reflection on limits of claims made for certain kinds of knowledge” (Critical Theory, 2006) was an early influence on this theory. In addition, other origins of critical theory can be traced back to the following key individuals: Rene Descartes (1596–1650), G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831), and Karl Marx (1818–83).

Although many individuals are credited with influencing critical theory, the theory itself did not emerge until the end of the 18th century during the European Enlightenment. According to some, the most important works in Western Marxism in cultural analysis came out of the Frankfurt School. This school was established during the early 1920s as a research institute at the University of Frankfurt. Theodore W. Adorno (1903–69), Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) were the major figures of this school. At the Frankfurt School, these philosophers “attempted to explain why the socialist revolution prophesised by Marx in the mid-nineteenth century did not occur as expected” (Agger, 1991, p. 107).
Critical Theory Concepts

Critical Theory (in uppercase) refers to the theory associated with the Institute for Social Research established in Germany in 1927. In the literature, Critical Theory is also known as critical theory of society and critical social theory. In his classic 1937 essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” Mark Horkheimer (1986) states that Critical Theory differs from other theories because “critical theory does not have one doctrinal substance today, another tomorrow” (p. 234).

Critical Theory is a comprehensive theory that encompasses many ideas. Some of its key tasks are: challenging ideology, contesting hegemony, unmasking power, overcoming alienation, learning liberation, reclaiming reason, learning democracy, and racializing, gendering, and teaching criticality (Brookfield 2005). For my CEP, I specifically focused on the following concepts of critical theory: challenging ideologies, contesting hegemony, and unmasking power.

Challenging and critiquing ideology

Critical Theory’s “tradition draws upon Marxist scholarship to illuminate the ways in which people accept as normal a world characterized by massive inequities” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 2). This set of unquestioned dominant beliefs that many view as natural is what theorists call ideological. Consequently, the unconscious acceptance of these beliefs serves to reproduce the current system.

According to Brookfield (2005), “as adult educators, [the Critical Theory] tradition helps us understand how people learn to perceive and challenge this situation” (p. 2). My study looked at parents, who unlike the majority of other
parents, refuse to accept the reality of their current situation. Many of the participants in my study are members of the working class, which, according to Marcuse (1964), now includes the middle class. Unfortunately, the conditions of the public schools that serve their communities are often not comparable to those of other economic classes. These parents, along with their school, do not have the wealth to provide for the necessary resources, while at the same time they do not qualify for federal money targeted for communities in extreme poverty. “The persistence of class inequality in American life not only bespeaks differences in socioeconomic status, which define both people’s access to goods and services, as well as their capacity to buy political influence” (Nealon & Giroux, 2003, p. 184).

“As a learning process, ideology critique describes the ways in which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 13).

Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), a founding member of the Italian Communist Party, believed that “Marxism had failed to consider how ideology actually works to make itself unrecognizable. This is the trick of hegemony” (quoted in Sim & Loon, 2004, p. 36). Hegemony is defined as “the process by which we embrace ideas and practices that keep us enslaved” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 5). Gramsci used the concept of hegemony as a tool for cultural analysis.

Critical Theory is therefore not only concerned with questioning the passive acceptance that “the way things are”—or the way things seem—simply ‘is’ the
‘natural’ way” (Nowlan, 2001, p. 1) but also how people consent to and desire this. Gramsci was also interested in the way adults “developed a revolutionary class consciousness and the way they then learned to act on this to change society” and create a proletarian hegemony (Brookfield, 2005, p. 105).

My CEP explored, through the use of stories, the motivation of parent advocates who challenge the public schools in an effort to create a better environment for children. These parents, who are often oppressed by the public school system, do not accept things as they are, but instead are fighting for justice and demanding equity for students. These parent advocates are committed to “restructuring and deciphering the power relations . . . To act in and change reality” (Gur-Ze’ev, n.d., Common Ground section). These parents can be considered organic intellectuals. The concept of an organic intellectual was developed by Gramsci and is defined as “an activist and persuader who emerges from an oppressed group to work with, and on behalf of, that group” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 96). The parents in my study have become aware of, or are becoming aware of and challenging, the hegemonic education that they received and that their children are receiving. Through their advocacy, these parents are trying to change their children’s school as part of a general struggle over essential social change. The aim of Critical Theory, and the aim of my CEP, is to restore voice to marginalized groups—in this case, public school parents.
Power

“Power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action.

—Michel Foucault, *Power and Knowledge*

Foucault’s analysis of power was used to discuss underlying relations of power between parents and the school system. According to Michel Foucault (1926–1984), a French social theorist and associate of the Frankfurt School, where power is present, repression and liberation will exist. Power—its complexities and the resistance to it—is a key issue in my study, because wherever there is power, there are those who resist it. My CEP looked at parent advocates and their use of liberatory power, which, according to Brookfield (2005), “animates and activates helping people take control of their lives” (p. 119).

Trying to understand the role of power in the everyday thoughts and action of parents (who Berger positioned at the bottom of his pyramid to represent those with the least power in the school system), would be an exercise that Foucault called ascending analysis of power (Bloom, 1992). According to Foucault (1980), the only way to understand power is to investigate “how things work at the level of on-going subjugation” (p. 97).

In Critical Theory, learning to think critically about one’s situation (i.e., class, position, and issues of power) is a major learning task for adults. “Critical theory critiques and challenges unequal distributions of power within social, economic, and political systems” (Sandlin, 2002, p. 371). Criticalists agree that “power is a constituent of human existence that works to shape the oppressive and productive
nature of the human tradition” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 283). Using Critical Theory as my framework provided the foundation to explore the forces that allow parents to gain the power to shape decisions that affect the lives and education of their children. It helped me explore the relationship between parents and their desire to be empowered and act on behalf of their children.

As my theoretical lens, Critical Theory helped me understand and explain the relationship between parents and the public school. I am hopeful that my study will also be a catalyst that will help lead to the transformation into a better of the public school system. “Critical theory aims to help bring about a society of freedom and justice” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 8).

Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) write, “critical research attempts to expose the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decision that crucially affect their lives” (p. 282). My research explored the forces that assist individuals in shaping decisions that not only affect their lives but the lives of others.

Raising awareness of how and why adults challenge the ways of dominant ideology provides “the necessary theoretical opening for understanding how an educative process might enable people to give up their illusions” (Welton, 1995, p. 13). My study illuminates how the parents find the courage, skills, and energy to challenge their and their children’s situation in the public school. My CEP highlights the activism of parents through their narratives. With my CEP, I hope the voices of these parent advocates, who often are marginalized by the school system, will find a place in the literature of adult education and critical theory. According to Marx, the intent of critical theory is to act as a catalyst for revolutionary social change. It is
through the critical theory of adult learning that my study can contribute to creating a public school system that is first of all built on democratic values, while at the same time incorporates fairness and justice.

**Qualitative Research**

According to John Dewey, research is the study of experience. In this research, I conducted a qualitative study to uncover the motivations, characteristics, and personality traits that have lead the parents to advocate. In reviewing the literature related to parent advocacy, I have found that the voices of parents are missing. Current literature is being dominated by the voices of educational administrators and professionals. In congruence with the goal of qualitative research, my study attempts to “create spaces for [these] heretofore unheard voices and positions in human inquiry” (Piantanida & Garman, 1999, p. 249). The use of qualitative research method allowed me not only to connect with each of the participants, but also to appreciate and honor the uniqueness of each of them.

The term, qualitative, means “exploring the broader understanding possible in natural conversations and narratives, as well as examining qualities within human experience” (Piantanida & Garman, 1999, p. 245). According to Merriam (2002), qualitative research:

- Attempts to understand how people make sense of their experiences
- Uses the researcher as the primary tool for data collection and analysis
- Is inductive; researchers gather data to build hypotheses
- Is richly descriptive
Merriam (2002) further states that qualitative research seeks, “to understand the perspectives of those involved, uncover the complexity of human behavior in context, and present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (p. 25). Bogdan and Bilken (2003) add one more defining feature to qualitative research: naturalistic. They state, “qualitative researchers assume that human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs and whenever possible, they go to that location” (p. 7). Throughout this study, I was fortunate to observe many of the participants while they were involved in various forms of advocacy.

Paradigm

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define a paradigm as “a basic set of beliefs that guide actions” (p. 157). They further state that the following four major interpretive paradigms structure qualitative research: positivist and post-positivist, constructive-interpretive, critical (Marxist, emancipatory) and feminist-poststructural. My research falls under the interpretive paradigm. This paradigm assumes there are multiple realities and that the participant and researcher co-create understandings. The interpretive paradigm strives for coherence, which provides the reader with a vivid picture of the essence of the meaning of the topic being studied. My study explored those experiences of parents that inspired them to advocate.
In an effort to cherish and preserve the voices and stories of the parents in my study, I chose narrative inquiry as my methodology. Narrative inquiry is a method that “uses stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form” (Merriam, 2002, p. 9). My research does not attempt to create a theory or to find a truth that is universal to all parents. Instead, it views each individual in their unique context and searches for commonalities in their stories. Narrative research maintains, “there is neither a single absolute truth in human reality nor one correct reading or interpretation of a text” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zibler, 1998, p. 2).

Narrative inquiry, “as a strand of qualitative research focuses on the ‘self’ [rather than society] for data collection and data analysis” (L. Bloom, 2002, p. 310). Narrative inquiry “has a long tradition in the humanities because of its power to elicit ‘voice’” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 123). It is a holistic way to view an individual because it acknowledges the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimension of meaning-making. Narrative inquiry takes into account not just the story but how the story is told. A participant’s pauses in speech, expressions, gestures, tone are all viewed as important in trying to get the whole picture and understand the individual. Through the participant’s story, an inquirer can gain insight into the
participant’s history, beliefs, culture, emotions, and motivation while also acknowledging biological and environmental influences.

“Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). These stories appear in various forms: biography, life history, oral history, autoethnography, and autobiography. According to Clandinin and Connelly, narrative inquiry focuses on the situation (the notion of place), the interaction (personal and social), and continuity (past, present, and future), thus creating a three-dimensional space.

There are three central theoretical goals that structure the narrative research approach. They are:

1. Narrative research is concerned with using individual lives as the primary source of data.
2. Narrative research is concerned with using narratives of the “self” as a location from which the researcher can generate social critique and advocacy.
3. Narrative research is concerned with deconstructing the “self” as a humanist conception, allowing for nonunitary conceptions of the self (L. Bloom, 2002, p. 310).

Researchers using narrative inquiry believe that “storytelling is integral to understanding lives and that all people engage in the construction of narratives” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 5). It is through this process of “telling stories that
bring past and present together [that many participants] give coherence and meaning to their own lives” (Hurtig, 2005 p. 17).

Using this methodology allowed me the privilege of listening to these parents and their stories, thus producing rich, thick descriptions of them in such a way that value and illuminate the essence of their voices. In narrative inquiry, the researcher seeks descriptive information that focuses on what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as the four directions of inquiry:

1. **inward**: feelings, hopes, aesthetic, moral reaction
2. **outward**: existential conditions, environment
3. **backward/forward**: past, present, and future

In my study, participants were asked to share stories about their current motivation, and to reflect on and share stories about their past motivations and advocacy work. These memories are significant because, according to Adler, “there are no ‘chance memories’ . . . memories are personal creations; they consist of choices, distortions, and inventions of past events in a manner that befits the individual’s current goals, interest, or mood” (Adler, 1931 as cited in Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zibler, 1998, p. 79). Not only are the stories these parents shared important, but their interpretations of these past events are just as important. Through the retelling of their stories, the sharing of their emotions, and my inquiry into their outside influences and conditions, I was able to view their inner world and hear their private thoughts.
“Narrative inquiry is often criticized for its focus on the individual rather than on the social context” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 123); however, by listening to participants’ stories, the researcher will understand the social and cultural context from the participants’ perspective. Hearing the account through the voices of the participants is extremely important because so often “personal interpretations of past time . . . are often in deep and ambivalent conflict with the official interpretive devices of a culture” (Kay, 1986 as cited in Hurtig, 2005). The following excerpt from the book, *Narrative Research* (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zibler, 1998), highlights the importance of stories:

Stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world; at the same time, they shape and construct the narrator’s personality and reality. The story is one’s identity, a story created, told, revised and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves to others, by the stories we tell (p. 7).

Besides the usefulness of narrative inquiry, I chose this methodology because “it is not only the participants’ stories that are retold by a narrative inquirer, . . . it is also the inquirers’ stories that are open for inquiry and retelling” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60). Parent advocacy is a topic that is very close to my heart. As a parent advocate and as a researcher, I thought it important to choose a methodology that would allow me to reflect and confront my own untold narratives. Narrative inquiry is a collaborative process that allows both the researcher’s and participants’ voices to be heard (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

According to Mishler (1995), “We, [the researchers,] too, are storytellers and through our concepts and methods—our research strategies, data samples, transcription procedures, specifications of narrative units and structures, and interpretive perspectives—we construct the story and its meaning. In this sense the
story is always coauthored, either directly in the process of an interviewer eliciting an account or indirectly through our representing and thus transforming others’ text and discourses” (pp. 117–118 as cited in Sharan Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 287).

Research Design

This next section provides the details and rationale of who participated in the study, how they were selected, what data collection methods were used, and how the data was managed and analyzed.

Participant Selection

For my study, purposeful and snowball samplings were used to select participants. Purposeful sampling can be defined as “selecting sample[s] from which the most can be learned” (Merriam 2002, p. 12). Snowballing is defined as having one participant lead you to the next.

The participants were selected because they are parents who advocate for children other than their own. These participants were identified by advocacy organizations, participants in parent meetings, and other parent advocates. During each interview, participants were asked to identify other parent advocates—specifically, other individuals they viewed as excellent advocates. Participants sometimes unknowingly identified individuals who were already participating in my study. To my surprise, these participants were not from the same school but had
connected through parent advocacy organizations, conferences, and other meetings. I found that the group of parent advocates is a small group that is interconnected in many ways and not always connected by a common school.

Participants

My study consists of ten participants. Redundancy in data was the primary criterion used to determine the number of participants. New participants were no longer sought once my data were saturated. Participants were parents who advocate for changes within their child’s public school and were exclusively women (i.e., biological mothers, grandmothers, or stepmothers). Of the ten participants, eight were African-American, one was biracial (African-American and Caucasian), and one Bolivian (a naturalized U.S. citizen). Their ages ranged from late 30s to mid-40s.

Most of the participants’ children attended different inner-city schools; however, all the schools are part of the same urban public school district. This school district is comprised of over 500 elementary schools and 100 high schools and has a student body of over 400,000. The student population is comprised of 49% African American, 38% Latino, 8% Caucasian, 2% multiracial, and 3% from other minority groups. Eighty-six percent of the students are from low-income families.

As the parent of two children in the same public school district, I have also spent a great deal of time advocating for changes within my children’s school. My experience with the struggles, challenges, and pain of trying to get a quality education for my children in an enriching environment allowed me to develop a rapport with the participants.
**Data Collection**

In order to get a rich thick description consistent with qualitative and narrative inquiry, the following methods of data collection were employed: initial contact, interviews, journaling, and observations.

**Initial Contact**

Once a participant agreed to be interviewed, a confirmation letter was sent via U.S. mail or e-mail. The confirmation letter included the following questions for them to begin pondering:

- Do you consider yourself a person who fights for change?
- What kind of changes or other advocating have you done?
- What motivates you to speak out/act out about school?
- Can you remember the first time you began to speak out or take actions?
- Or is there another time that stands out in your memory that you will never forget?

Discussing their responses to these questions provided a smooth opening and transition into our interviews. If there was sufficient time for delivery, a journal was also sent to each participant.

**Interviews**

Interviews were my primary mode of data collection. Interviews allowed me to hear how study participants interpret their world and what they believe to be the source of their motivation. According to Merriam (1998), interviews are necessary
“when we cannot observe behaviors [and] feelings . . . and when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (p. 72).

All participants engaged in an initial interview of approximately 90 minutes and a follow-up interview of approximately 45 minutes. Consistent with qualitative research, the interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions (Sharan Merriam & Associates, 2002). The questions focused on past and present motivations of these parents to advocate and their description of themselves. Interviews were conducted over a seven-week period during the months of February and March 2006. The interviews took place wherever participants felt comfortable or wherever convenient. Locations included my home, their home, their workplace, and their children’s school. All interviews were recorded with signed permission given by the participants.

During follow-up interviews, participants were asked if they had any further thoughts about their advocacy that they wanted to share. During that time, I shared with each participant the poem that I created with their words, a few pages of the findings, and my conclusions. After participants read the findings, I asked them if they recognized their voice (quotes) and if they were comfortable with their pseudonym.

Journal

In addition to interviews, journals were used. The reason for the use of various methods is that “it is . . . possible that different methods tap different domains of knowing” (Mathison, 1988, p. 14), thereby producing a richer set of data. “Journal
is] a powerful heuristic tool” that can be used to refine one’s thoughts and “allows participants in a research project an active voice” (Janesick, 1999, p. 506, 522). Participants were given the option of maintaining a journal in which to record their thoughts and ideas surrounding the topic of parent advocacy and their motivations. Most participants received and wrote in their journals prior to their interview. At the interviews, they shared with me their journal writings and these thoughts served as a beginning point of discussion. Journals were not collected and were used as a tool for participants to reflect and gather their thoughts. If a participant had not received a journal prior to the interview, she received one immediately after the interview. Participants recorded in their journals events and thoughts they had not remembered to share with me during their interviews; however, in follow-up conversations and chance meetings, participants told me some of the things they wrote. Regardless of the participant’s decision to use the journal, all participants received one.

Observations

Many of my participants and I encountered each other regularly throughout the study at various community parent meetings, conferences, and advocacy events. At each of these events, I recorded observations about the participants and their involvement. Observing them engaged in advocacy activities similar to my own, I developed a deeper connection than just researcher and participant.
Data Management

Transcriptions

All tapes were immediately transcribed following the interview. Afterward, I listened to each tape repeatedly to check the accuracy of each transcription and to ensure that laughter, pauses, and other expressions of emotions were noted. During this process, I referred to my field notes and transferred into the margin of the transcripts notes that I had taken about the participant’s facial expression and demeanor during select parts of interviews.

Researcher’s Journal

According to Janesick (1999), journaling about one’s thoughts and feelings will not only help in the journey to improve one’s research but will also allow for deepening knowledge of parent advocacy. Throughout the study, I maintained a journal in which I wrote my field notes, which included my observations and thoughts. I made note of participants’ physical expressions, mood, and emotional state. During the interview, I limited my note-taking to recording any other information I felt that would not be captured by the tape recorder, e.g., facial expression when talking about a specific person or event. I also noted any interruptions or distractions that occurred during the interview and when the tape recorder was paused. If the interview took place at the participant’s home or within their personal space at work, I wrote down observations about the physical surroundings. I also jotted down notes after phone calls or conversations that took place outside the interview. This journal accompanied me to all monthly parent
advocacy meetings, forums, and conferences where I would often encounter study participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the “process of systemically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other material that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings . . . to increase . . . understanding of them” (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003, p. 147). The constant comparative method, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was used. This method entails taking one interview, or another type of data, and comparing it to the next interview, thus creating an initial set of tentative categories. These tentative categories are then used and/or revised as needed for further comparison to each subsequent interview, thus causing “the researcher, to continually shift back and forth between deductive and inductive modes of thinking” (Merriam, 1998, p. 192). In some instance, some of these categories are eventually discarded. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) “emergent categories usually prove to be the most relevant and the best fitted to the data” (p. 37).

As I read through the first transcript, I placed codes in the margins and highlighted the corresponding section. According to Merriam (1998), “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p. 164). After synthesizing and analyzing my data, I used these codes to develop themes. As I proceeded to the next transcript, I searched for these themes and for any new ones. If a new theme emerged in the subsequent transcripts, I rechecked the previous
transcripts to see if it might have appeared in them also. These themes became my first set of coding categories. If these themes did not appear in other transcripts, I made note of this also for possible further questioning of these participants during follow-up interviews.

After completing my initial coding of all transcripts, codes were refined by subdividing broad codes into specific subcodes and grouping less frequent codes with relevant ones. Besides using emerging themes, a coding scheme was also developed based on key concepts of Critical Theory. Hegemony, challenging ideology, power, and subcategories of these topics were used. The themes that emerged from my data will be discussed in the findings chapter.

During this process, I again reviewed the transcripts and notated the sequence of events and experiences of each parent advocate. I then compared these events to each other, which helped me create the following display.
Parents were graduates of the public school system

Parents were involved in traditional forms of parent involvement

Parents were dissatisfied and frustrated with their child’s school

Parents transferred their child more than once

Parents decide to stop transferring their children realizing “there’s no utopia”

Parents began to join school organizations and community organizations

Parents held officer position in their school organizations

Parents use their knowledge as power and begin advocating.

Events Leading to Parent Advocacy
**Internal Validity**

“Internal validity asks the question, ‘How congruent are one’s findings with reality?’” (Sharan Merriam & Associates, 2002, p.25). Merriam reminds us that particularly in qualitative research, “it is important to understand the perspectives of those involved, uncover the complexity of human behavior in context and present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (p. 25). In order to ensure validity, I employed following methods: data triangulation, member check, and peer review.

**Data Triangulation**

“[T]riangulation as a strategy provides a rich and complex picture of some social phenomenon,” which might result in convergence of the data, inconsistency among the data, or data that is contradictory (Mathison, 1988, p. 15). In my study, data were gathered through participant interviews, observations at various parent advocacy events (e.g., meetings, conferences, and forums), and through current relevant newspaper articles. Also, an extensive review of literature from psychology (motivation, personality traits, characteristics), education (K-12 and adult education), social sciences (activism) and critical theory (power) was performed. The information gathered from these various sources, along with my notes, provided me with assorted lenses through which to view my data and, at the same time, increased the validity of my findings.
Member Check

A copy of the transcripts, along with a one-page summary of the transcript, was sent to each participant for their review and comments. In addition, my findings were presented to the participants to see if they were “able to recognize their experiences in my interpretation and/or suggest some fine tuning to better capture their perspectives” (Sharan Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 26).

Peer Review

Throughout my study, I have shared my thoughts and reflections about my participants with members of my research team. Many of the members on my team are students in my doctoral cohort. These members, who had no personal connections with my study or its outcomes, included parents and non-parents. My primary and secondary advisors have reviewed my findings.

Possible Bias

Because my daughters attend a public school that is in the same district as the schools of the participants’ children and that is plagued with similar problems, I too, have experienced similar moments of frustration and disappointment when dealing with the school system. Although some may perceive my experiences as creating bias, I see them as an advantage because these shared experiences make me an “insider.” As an advocate, I try to stay active in the school community. Many of times throughout the period of this study, I would run into many of my participants at various meetings and events throughout the city. I believe the participants felt that my
interest in them was genuine and, in turn, they felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences with me.

To counter any possible bias, I started each interview by telling the participants the reasons I am interested in researching this topic. I explained that, as a parent who advocates, I get discouraged and sometimes experience feelings of hopelessness. It is these feelings that compel me to try to understand what drives these advocates and keeps them motivated to continue even when past attempts are not viewed as successful. My experiences and my interest in learning more about successful advocating provided the initial impetus for my research.

Another way to counter bias was to use narrative inquiry as my methodology. Narrative inquiry allows participants to share their stories and, at the same time, it embraces the idea of dialogue between participant and researcher. This methodology allowed me the freedom to share my experiences when queried by the participants.

Limitations

Although I am addressing the issue of limitations, I wish to reiterate that my study does not seek to create a theory or make any generalization from the findings of parent advocates.

First of all, my participants were all parent advocates in the same school district. Second, although race or ethnicity was not a criterion for participant selection, all my participants were members of racial minority groups: biracial (African American and Caucasian), Latina, and African American. The school district to which the parents belonged is composed of various races and ethnicities, but the
overwhelming majority of the parents and students are African American and Hispanic. Both these anomalies can be explained by the use of snowballing, the method I used for participant selection. It is a widely known fact that most individuals associate with those who not only share similar values and ideas, but who are also members of the same racial or ethnic group.

Although these parents were members of the same school district, many of them represented different schools; three parents were from the same school. Each parent’s story was as unique as each individual. One final limitation is that all participants were volunteers; these participants may, for the most part, be those who are naturally vocal and are leaders who are not reticent about expressing their opinions.

These limitations do not diminish the validity of my study. The participants in my study represent a group of women who are not only active in their children’s schools, but who also regularly take up the advocacy issues of other participants. It is through this engagement that many of my participants found and connected with each other. Hence, they referred a participant or were referred by a research participant to participate in this study.

This study focused on exploring the motivation and experience of parents advocating for change within the public school system. This study is not only important but will be a source of motivation for others to begin and/or continue to advocate. It also shed lights on how these parents confront and, in some cases, overcome barriers, power dynamics and school politics in effort to create change.
When one considers the lack of research on what parents are currently doing that is positive and productive for their school community, the limitations of this study seem insignificant. My study contributes to the discipline of adult education by bringing into the field research on parent activism, which is one way to address reform.

Summary

In this chapter, I have given an overview of critical theory, which is the theoretical frame underlying this study. This study is presented from a qualitative research paradigm and uses narrative inquiry. I have provided an overview of the data collection and analysis method I employed in conducting this study. In addressing the issues of validity and reliability, I have discussed data triangulation, member check, and peer review. In the final section of this chapter, I discussed possible bias and limitations.
CHAPTER FOUR: VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce each of the participants. The chapter begins with an overview of the parent advocates in my study. Each advocate is then introduced through a brief paragraph detailing some of her attributes, followed by a poem that was created using the words of each participant. Each poem reflects the uniqueness of each parent advocate. It is my hope that through these poems, the reader will get an idea of who they are.

Introduction

Although these women have been called pests, troublemakers, and other names, all the women in my study are phenomenal women. I found them to be knowledgeable, honest, approachable, and dependable. In addition to being the parent or guardian of more than one child, each woman found the time and energy to fight for issues that are important to them. These women are fighting for causes that not only affect their child, but also other children. They are fighting for systemic changes at their child’s school.
Karen

Karen is married with two children, David and Ciarra. David, Karen’s stepson, immigrated to the U.S. from Liberia when he was in elementary school. David is currently serving in the armed forces. Ciarra, Karen’s daughter, a U.S.-born citizen is eleven years old and is currently in the fifth grade. Karen’s daughter is currently attending her fourth elementary school.

Karen, who has a bachelor’s and master’s degree in education, is a graduate of the same school district that her daughter attends. After periods of unemployment followed by part-time employment, Karen recently found full-time employment. She describes herself as honest, open, dependable, and a great communicator. She believes her confident, outgoing personality is a direct result of the era (the 1960s) during which she was raised.

Karen’s Poem

I love learning

As a child,
We lived across the street from school
I loved going to school

Sometimes, I would rather go to school sick
Because school
Was just that much fun

Education and school is important
However,
The dynamics, in terms of safety
My son and daughter go through,
I didn’t have to
Raising a child,
Educating a child
Is very intense now

I’m concerned about school
Concerned about her school,
And concerned about her, my daughter
And her safety

You know what I want to see?
Change

I want to see a child
Walk to school safely,
Without being abused,
By people in the school

Sometimes, I’m angry
No!
I am angry
Quite often.

I tend to speak out
I tend to share how I feel
Be it good or bad

I have learned to choose my battles
Deciding what I am going to speak about
It depends on my motivation

And when I talk
I only want to talk to people who have influence
I don’t want to talk to people who don’t have the power,
That’s wasted time
That’s wasted air

When I’m very angry
I don’t speak out
As a technique of anger management
Because if I continue…

I try to defuse myself,
Might write a letter,
May talk to someone else about it
My daughter says
“Mom, you’re always complaining.
You’re always saying something,
They’re going to take it out on me.”

And I’m like,
“Who’s going to take it out on what?”
so
I’m going through it with her
And sometimes,
It’s uncomfortable

But I’m concerned about her
Concerned about her school

They say
I talk a lot
I’m very vocal
I try to be open
Approachable,
Independent

School officials say
I’m A Pest
I
don’t really care

I would describe myself
As quite shy
No!
I’m an extrovert
I have confidence in speaking up
I see myself
As dependable, reliable, honest,
A person who communicates effectively

You know what I want to see?

Change
Dawn

Dawn is married with two sons ages 16 and 23. Barry, her sixteen-year-old, is a junior in high school. Before becoming a homemaker, Dawn spent most of her adult years working in the healthcare management field.

Dawn states that because she’s home most of the day, she has plenty of time to spend at her son’s high school. Dawn states that she has always opened her home to her children’s friends and rarely allowed her children to spend the night out.

*Dawn’s Poem*

Two sons—23 and 16,
My husband owns a janitorial service
I’m kind of a housewife and
—entrepreneur

It allows me to spend time at the school
And so you know,
I get there, I see to things
I spent a year
Sitting in the Dean of Girls’ office
And I saw.

The things I saw
I was not happy at all
I said, well
I need to get in here, and
Step in there

I started talking up
Because I don’t have a problem talking
I’ve always been vocal
Always fair

My girlfriend says I am bossy
She says, I’m always taking charge
I am
Always taking charge

You know, my mother
doesn’t take any mess
She’s so strong
And that’s why I think
I am the way I am

I also think I’m an advocate, because I . . .
I know I bring something to the table

I believe in fighting for the kids
I don’t fight dirty—
I fight smart,
And I’ve never backed down

As long as I’m doing the right thing
And the outcome is for a good reason—
The education of those kids
I fight

I have to be quite honest with you
I think—
This has made a difference in this child’s life

I wish
I had the time to do it
When my other son
Was in high school

My son
My oldest son teases me and goes,
“Have they made you assistant principal yet?”

My youngest son,
He doesn’t say it
But I think he’s proud
His mother’s involved

Kids see that you care
That you’re willing to
Go through the good
As well as the bad times
With them

Several kids hug me.
And don’t even know my child
Dana

Dana is a single mother of two boys, Joseph, an eighteen-year-old and Calvin, a thirteen-year-old. Although Dana works full time with inflexible hours, she still manages to find time to advocate on behalf of the children at the school of her eldest son.

Dana, who describes herself as free hearted, helped raise her ex-husband’s child from his current marriage. She states,

A lot of people would say, “You taking care of that girl’s baby?” This is a baby. This baby has nothing to do with grown folk’s mess. And that’s the way I am. Eventually, he’s twelve, thirteen years old now and that’s my child

Dana’s Poem

Hmmm . . .
Just look.

What I look at . . .
Angers me.

God
God has been taken out of so much of this,
That’s the part of the problem.
What is THAT about?

I’m not having it.
Not in my household
We’re not having it.

The reason why I participate
And I am advocate
And I stand up for the parents and the students

Because I have always been involved;
Day One—
Found out there’s a parent group,
I signed up
Everybody can’t do that,
You know.
I have to be involved,
Because if,
if
I would even hate to think
What the results would be.

In today’s society
If you’re an absentee parent
Your child might suffer.

It’s SO infuriating.

I fight,
not only for him, my child
I fight for children in the neighborhood

You know
That’s what God intended for us to do
That’s why I fight

I guess it’s just the way I grew up
I had real grandparents
REAL grandparents. . . . They’d
Feed anybody’s kids
It was my surroundings,
The way I grew up

People tell me,
I am easy going
And have a soft heart

. . . . I am freehearted
But if you push,
If you push,
Hmmm . . .

. . . . I used to have a bad temper
Really Bad.

I have 2 kids
That’s why I fight

I love my kids.
I love kids, period.
If I can help, I will

That’s why I stay involved
That—
and Because I have to
Because if I depend on
Other people for everything…
Hmm

They can’t
They can’t do it without us
Without the parents
Without the parents’ voices
It takes us

It’s a shared responsibility.

Every year
I’ve tutored
At community schools

You know
If you don’t bless people,
You won’t get blessed.

I’m passionate
Passionate about my kids
Passionate about education
Passionate about being fair
And so
This is a part of my outlet

It’s crazy
    It’s all political . . .
    There’s still . . . ah . . . disparities

I think,
I think I will continue to be there

You know,

I love kids
And I love my kids.
Myrléne

Myrléne is a single mother of three children, two girls ages 11 and 16 and one boy age 13. Myrléne, whose native language is Spanish, was born in Bolivia. As a young adult, she illegally immigrated to the U.S. and later became a naturalized citizen. In order to make ends meet, Myrléne often works multiple jobs and double shifts at these jobs. Myrléne, whose parents died when she was young, states she has been fighting since she was little.

*Myrléne’s Poem*

Bolivia!!
I’m from Bolivia!
My daughters 16 and 11
Son 13
My kids have all my support
From the beginning
I was involved in their school:
Meetings, field trips, committees . . .
But sometimes, the language
Is just hard
You know,
Everyday, I’m running
Running
Just, you know, very involved

Helping in the community
Helping other people
Visiting those who don’t have families
Running
If there’s some training I’m there
. . . sometimes,
I’m not home on Saturday
Running
Running everyday.

I fight
I fight for day laborers,
For immigration. For rights . . .
I didn’t have the green card
But I fight

I was arrested
But I fight

When I was young.
I didn’t have anybody
I lost my parents
I don’t know that support

That’s what motivated me

Don’t know how to describe myself
Uhmm . . .
Nice, strict,
Like to help a lot
Help whoever needs help

Running,
Looking,
I’m always looking for information
I just wanted to learn. Not just for me,
But for others
I’m always giving information

Others describe me
As a leader
A leader in the community

I, I like to involve other people
That’s the better way
And that makes me
Feel good,
It makes me
Work hard

I don’t have limits and
I don’t have time to be tired
There’s a lot of people to assist
My kids
They are future advocates

My kids
They know
They know their rights
Shaun

Shaun is the married mother of a seventeen-year-old senior in high school. Shaun and her husband are both employed full time. Shaun, however, works from home and has some flexibility with work schedule.

Shaun describes herself as having a strong voice and being determined. When she became aware that at the beginning of the school year some students who had not yet been scheduled for classes, she began making inquiries. She states, “[administration] gave us half-ass answers as to why. . . . I didn’t care why. I cared that it was happening and it needed to be changed immediately and it needed to be addressed immediately.”

Shaun’s Poem

I’m an advocate of children
A strong advocate of children
Probably first and foremost education

I taught my 17-year-old
The importance of advocacy
The importance of volunteering and being involved in your community

I’m sure I got that from my mom
My mom
Was always there
Questioning and doing
Being involved in positive ways
And I was always glad

My older sister
My younger sister
Me
We are all advocates
Advocates of children
Concerned about issues for children
Everything’s not about my son
It’s been about children
And my passion has grown
Even more now
Because I had no clue

This school is just terrible
And I’m just trying to deal with that

I went to the Board
And I asked
Do you consider my son’s school successful?
It’s a new school
And children are failing

I was ostracized a whole lot
But it didn’t mean anything
I learned to just pray for them
The ones who have attacked me

I’m not going to back down
Because you have to do
What you believe is the correct thing

In spite of that
I was vice-president of the PTO
Now President and
I’m a representative
For the school council

It’s just a struggle
Trying to address issues
A struggle

I want to see all these kids get an education
I want change for everybody
And once my son graduates I will still be involved
I truly believe that
Carrie

Carrie is a single mother of two children, one boy who is a fourteen-year-old freshman and a girl who is an eighteen-year-old senior. Carrie is an entrepreneur and sets her own work schedule; this flexibility allows her to be active at her children’s school and in the community.

Carrie’s Poem

Me
I’m easy going,
A little stand offish
You know,
People say I’m really not approachable,
But I was cool with you right?
(Laughter)

I have two children
A boy 14, a girl 18
They’re pretty normal kids

As much as possible,
I try to get involved.
I live in this community

Volunteering, that was cool.
I always volunteered in my kid’s classroom
From preschool up

And then,
These last two years
I started really getting involved

But then,
Then the teachers started to change.

That was a bummer.
Why wouldn’t somebody want assistance?
It always bothered me.
You know,
I’m just trying to help out, you know,
Do a lil’ leg work
I got so frustrated.
I’m like, “There has to be something more.”
I decided to launch out and attend other meetings.

But once I went to their meetings,
I’m like,
“All these idiots
If they can do it
I can do it.”
(Laughter)

And that’s when I ran
I was just a parent representative
And I was like,
“There’s a new sheriff in town.
Things gone change ‘round here.”

You know, I voice my opinion,
I like to be point blank.
”That ain’t right!
This is crazy!”

Me
I will jump into anything.
Almost.
You know, not just education
No

I believe if one person stands up,
It should be heard and corrected
You don’t need a whole trial.

Whatever I do
I don’t want anybody to mention it
I just want to do it
I think that’s a safe way of doing things

But,
Education is the only real passion
I was like a late bloomer

When my kids was growing up
I didn’t know anything
Nobody ever told me
I never asked
But
But when I found out
I was mad!
Ok?

I thought just volunteering
That was cool.
But you know,
In order for the schools to improve,
Parents will have to do something drastic!

“What can we do about it?”
Hell, if I can do this,
Advocating . . .
Y’all can do this too.

You know,
It’s a struggle
I don’t see all these problems
Getting resolved any time soon

My kids graduated
But this upcoming election
I plan on running
As a community rep.

Girrrrl, I’m excited!
Clara

Clara is married and has three children, two daughters ages 21 and 26 and one son age 16 who is a junior in high school. Clara is a different type of advocate from the other participants. She is not the type of person who shouts at meetings and leads protests, like the other advocates she knows and admires. Instead, she is quiet, soft-spoken, and even reserved; however, she should not be mistaken for someone who lacks fires or isn’t driven.

Clara was one of the few participants who wanted to be interviewed in her home. As soon as I walked into Clara’s home, it was clear that her children were her pride and joy. Clara’s living room and kitchen, which is where the interview took place, were filled with 8 1/2 x 10 photographs of her children. These included baby pictures, prom pictures, and graduation pictures for each child from each of their graduations— elementary, high school, and college.

Clara’s Poem

OK
So, you know,
I have three children,
I’m proud of all of them.

Ages—
26, She graduated last year
    with her master’s,
    I believe.

21, a junior.
    —Industrial Engineering
    That’s her major.

And my son is 16,
In high school now
He wants to pursue engineering—
    Aerospace.

It’s very inspiring!

You need to push your children these days to get an extra career
That extra education
To want more out of life

We need to stand behind our children
To let them know
That in today’s society
Learning is more important

WE don’t want them to turn to drugs
WE don’t want them to turn to factory jobs.

We WANT them to be in the corporate world.
To stand for what they believe in.
To have goals,
To reach their highest potential

Make something good of themselves

Because THEY’RE our future
And without them
We Are Nothing.

I was in a meeting and
She [another advocate] came in
She spoke up
    Expressed her feelings

[Clara continues]

    A lot of us are afraid to speak up
She’s not afraid to . . .
some people
are gifted to speak their opinion, and I
think she’s best with that

I would like to be a follower of her
Because
I, too,
Want the change, but I’m not
A big speaker and
Supporting her,
She's like my voice of what I believe in
Angela

Angela is the mother of four children. Her three older are adults, and her youngest is in first grade. Angela has devoted her life to activism and advocating for various education and community issues. She is well recognized throughout her community for her efforts and level of expertise.

Angela’s Poem

Four children
Oldest, 29,
Had her bachelor’s, master’s and
Was in the process of her PhD but
DIED in her sleep

A son, twenty-nine, a mechanical engineer

A third son
Just worry his mom to death
Couldn’t get him out of high school
So he’s home with me.

And then I had this baby
Now in first grade

Look at where I came from
[The housing projects] in 1960
In that community,
Parents were on drugs
Or, like me,
a single parent, young

Something’s got to happen

That community is what made me
I’m one of them
It’s personal.
It doesn’t matter that I’m tired now
I’m going to make a difference

The mayor of the city asked,
"Why do you fight so hard?"
I said,
“Because it’s personal.”
And it is

All children . . .
So they won’t break in my house
Take the things I’ve worked
. . . so Hard for . . .
Should be educated
At the best of their ability
With the services they need

So, I continue to fight
I fight for the people who cannot

And that’s
What I’ve been doing
I don’t know.
I’m just crazy.
This stuff—
It’s my life,
Just like breathing

I’m going to fight
Until the day I die.
Shirley

Shirley is a single parent with six children ages 21, 19, 16, 12, 10, and 4. She also helps with the other children in her family. She recently quit her job in order to become a full-time volunteer at her children’s schools. Shirley is an avid supporter of public schools. She is a member of various education advocacy and community groups.

*Shirley’s Poem*

38,
Soon to be 39,
real soon 40 is coming up

Born and raised in [this town]
Not married,
HAD two marriages,
Two sets of children:
   21, 19, 16
   12, 10, 4

Nice, shy,
I consider myself to be semi-intelligent
I’m pretty laid back
UNTIL politics or education comes up,
And then . . .

And then I’m something else
I get REALLY EXCITED,
’cause I know what it can do

Had an excellent experience
In the public schools, that’s why I
Believe it can work

It’s about political will.
People have to want to see it work
And that’s
What’s missing
[my kids’ school]
Not happy with what was going on
Ok!
So, don’t tell me this is it.
I refuse!

Those resources . . ..
They never made it to my kids,
And why not?

I knew something was wrong
I knew something just ain’t right

Being naïve
I’ve transferred around
Just trying to get them through school.

It hit me!

The different schools were all the same,
No parent involvement

It’s serious business,
’cause I’m like
This is an investment

I stopped working
Gone from a Stay-at-Home Mom to advocate, fighter

I’m going to come in here
And I’m fi’n’ to plant my roots.

I’m not going to scream and shout
But I’m not going anywhere.
This is not right
So either we’re going to work it out
Or we’re going to fight it out
I’m going to make parent involvement happen here.

The result of me speaking out
Sitting down,
Learning the process
Things have happened
And more than just for my child

They think I’m crazy.
My friends don’t always understand
Understand why I’m doing this for free

It’s just.
It’s important that I’m here.
And I’ve tried to leave
I really have

Seriously.
I’ve tried to go.

I can’t leave.
It’s something that keeps pulling me.

When my kids cross the stage,
With a degree
You’re all going to see

In my heart education is the key
Andrea

Andrea is a single mother of four children: two boys and two girls. Her two older children are adults, her younger daughter is in seventh grade, and her younger son is currently not attending school. Andrea currently attends school to improve her education.

Andrea’s Poem

I’m quiet
And not very outspoken
But I fight

I fight for everything
I fight to make sure my children get the resources they need
I fight for the school
For more parental involvement
For children who don’t have parents there for them

Quiet
Others also say I’m quiet
I’m trying to be more involved
This year I ran for governance
And I won, I’m vice-president

For years, I’ve attended meetings
I always attended conferences,
Lots of them

I am so full of resources
And want to share my knowledge
Share with others

I’ve always wanted to be involved
Involved in my community
Involved in my children’s school

I look at the fun of being involved . . .
Getting to know other moms.
Getting to help put plans together
Getting to interact with other parents
My youngest daughter,  
She gets involved, too,  
Helping out at meetings,  
I’ve been going to meetings for years

Sometimes, I get tired  
And I take a break,  
Sometimes I make phone calls  
But sometimes  
I’m tired

At my child’s school  
We need changes  
I want change  
I want my children to have what I didn’t  
I like being involved  
We need parents to be involved  
I want parents to be involved.
Conclusion

Through these poems, we have listened to the voices of these parent advocates. These poems give us the opportunity to become acquainted with each participant. In the following chapter, using the questions guiding my study, I will present my analysis of the stories.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

As stated in chapter one, this study examined the common characteristics and motivations of parent advocates. This chapter presents an analysis of the data gathered from the ten participants and is organized by the following 13 themes that have emerged:

1. Legacy of Advocacy
2. History of Volunteerism and Activism
3. School Involvement
4. Recognition That ‘Things Not Right’
5. Frustration and Transferring
6. Distrust
7. Responsibility and Duty
8. Awareness That a Better Educational Experience Exists
9. Knowledgeable about the System
10. Inspired by Other Parent Advocates
11. Leadership Traits
12. Want Something Better for Their Kids
13. Passion
Legacy of Advocacy

I guess it’s just the way I grew up
I had real grandparents
REAL grandparents…they’d
Feed anybody’s kids
It was my surroundings,
The way I grew up
—Dana

A legacy of advocacy is the first theme. Like Dana, the women in my study attributed their strong personality and sense of activism to their parents, grandparents, or others who helped raised them. All the participants described their parents as concerned and active members of society who “wouldn’t take any mess”—not at home, school, church, or in their community. The parent advocates in my study tell stories of how their parents were not only concerned about the injustices they witnessed in their community and at their schools, but also how their parents sought action.

Although many of the participants grew up in two-parent homes, their mothers are the ones they speak about. Often, advocacy is learned from the mother, and having a mother who was involved in advocacy seems to be a key determinant of later advocacy. Shaun said,

My mother was a very big advocate of social charity. She was very, very involved in our school, my siblings and my school. She volunteered, [and] . . . it was always a positive thing in spite of, you know, being a child not wanting my mother at the school all the time. So, I’m sure I got [my advocacy] from my mom.

Many of the participants remember watching their moms in action: attending meetings, speaking up, and protesting. Karen recounts,
I can’t tell you specifically what particular project [my mother] worked on, but I know she would drag us to these meetings all the time. And I was too young to really remember what they were fighting for, but I know we had attended these meetings with her all the time. My mother was very active in the community, helping people and I think that I couldn’t say that I didn’t have that influence of my mom. . . . She was advocating when things were right or when things were wrong. And as I said, when it comes to me as an adult now, and because of my personality, I tend to speak out, you know, when things are not right

Angela remembers actually accompanying her mother to a demonstration.

I am the way I am because of my mother. . . . I could remember at the age of four walking around the school, marching with my mother saying “Hey, Hey, what do you know, so and so got to go.” I can still hear it in my ears. This is when I was four. So it’s just unbelievable. . . . My mother was advocating. . . . So, I guess that was the beginning of when I began to start to make a difference. [I] didn’t know what I was talking about probably. I was doing what she told me.

Parents and grandparents were not the only ones whose actions influenced and helped shape these women into advocates. Many believe the presence of activists in their community also affected them, although they were very young at the time. The parents in my study range in age from late 30’s to late 40’s. They grew up during the 1960s, the heart of the Civil Rights movement. The 1960s was a time of civil and political unrest. Various groups across the nation were demonstrating, protesting, and agitating for change. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Fred Hampton were among the leaders of this time who were assassinated. Race riots were frequent occurrences across the country, with the largest ones in Detroit, Atlanta, and Cleveland. During the riots that took place in Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, it was reported that the “whole world is watching. Hippies and students were among the many groups across the nation protesting United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War.
Some study participants believe they were influenced by these major events that were happening in and around their community and the nation. Although the participants were children at the time, they were surrounded by these issues either directly or indirectly through the media. Participants felt the impact and were affected by these turbulent times.

I’m a baby boomer. I’m at the tail end of baby boomers and I just think that by me being born in 1963, and at the time everything, I became five, six, everybody around me who was some kind of president or civil rights person was being assassinated or murdered, and even though I didn’t really know what that meant at a young age, you can still feel the impact of what these people were doing for you in the future. These people were like—they did a lot for you and you don’t even realize that because of your age.

And I think because of that, and because of my personality and I’m such an extrovert that I have confidence in speaking up when things are not good or when things are good. And I think I have always been supported in that, but that’s just me (Karen).

Angela attributes the violence and destruction that she witnessed during the 1960’s to her development into the person she is today.

I think it came from when I . . . see, again I moved into [public housing] in 1960. I witnessed as a young girl, deaths. I witnessed people getting burned. I mean all kinds of things right in my face. And so my goal, even as a young girl in [the projects] was I’ve got to make a difference in life because we’ve got to change the way these people think. And the reason why I can say these people is because I’m one of them.
A history of volunteerism and activism in their communities, churches, and other nonschool-related areas is the second theme. Just like their parents, the advocates in my study are actively involved in many arenas: church, school, charity, and their community. It is not surprising because, according to Dana, although the site or project may change, the same people are always involved. Volunteering as a literacy tutor and assisting people in completing their applications for light, gas, and housing assistance are just a few of the activities in which the participants are involved.

As exemplified in Dana’s poem, many of the participants are actively involved in community projects, some of which are connected to their church. Clara states “Ahh, I am involved totally with my church affairs: ahh the Mission, Bible Class, Sunday School. . . . Umm . . . Children’s Church, I’m a teacher of the Children’s Church, so I’m actively involved in church.”

Many of the parents have been activists for decades and have been recognized as leaders in both their community and their children’s schools. Angela stated, “For example, . . . I recall back then in 1999, . . . they called me to the [state capital] to
meet to go before the House to testify for more money for energy assistance.” Angela continued,

So, I mean, it’s just that there’s a need for people who can’t speak to have someone that will speak and not be afraid to do that. And that’s just been what I’ve been doing with education, with housing, and everything that has something to do with poor and low income people. . . . I will fight a doornail if it’s about helping somebody accomplish something—be it education, keeping their lights and gas on, or getting housing. I’m just a fighter and [I] am going to fight until the day I die. So that’s what I do. That’s just me.

Myrléne recounted the story of the trouble she encountered while traveling out of town to discuss issues affecting laborers.

When I was arrested, actually, they were going to, uh, send me back to my country. Yeah, it was because, you know, I’m very active in the community and I was arrested with my kids on our way to New York. There was a big meeting over there for the day laborer workers’ rights—a big conference—and we had a, uh, flat tire and the state trooper just came and they asked us for our green cards and I didn’t have the green cards, of course, but . . . umm . . . he just put me in handcuffs in front of my kids.
The third theme is school involvement, with time being a key factor as a sub-theme. Throughout their interviews, parents talked about their general commitment to helping others. Although these parents were involved in church, community, school and charitable activities, any involvement with the school and issues of education became a top priority after they became a parent. As they began talking about their involvement with the schools, their eyes lit up and their posture changed. They sat erect and, when they spoke, their voices were filled with passion. Dana said, “So somebody, you know, asked me, ‘What are you passionate about?’ Well, I’m passionate about my kids. And I’m passionate about education. And I’m passionate about being fair. And so [advocating] is part of my outlet.”

As I analyzed the data, two things became clear early on. First, the amount of parent involvement had increased over time for the participants and second, the type of parental involvement had changed. For some, these changes happened simultaneously.
**Increased Parent Involvement**

All the parents mentioned that as time passed and their children got older, their level of parent involvement increased. Parents of multiple children mentioned that they became more involved as each subsequent child entered school. Some parents stated that their involvement increased because their child became more involved in school. Parents also noted that as their children became older and started participating in extracurricular activities, such as band, track, and football, their amount of involvement also increased, as they supported their children and the school in these new activities.

**Initial Involvement**

All the parents in my study were involved in their child’s education from the onset. Some participants’ involvement was minimum, e.g., participating in report card pick-up and basic teacher-parent communication. Other parents were more actively involved, serving as classroom volunteers, classroom moms, chaperones.

**Minimum Involvement.**

Participants who had minimum involvement at the beginning of their child’s education stated that lack of time was the main reason. Clara believes that most parents of young children are at the beginning of their careers, and therefore spend an enormous amount of time and energy trying to advance their careers. Clara confided to me, “My husband and I . . . ah . . . back then I was mostly career oriented. So . . . umm . . . to be honest, she was secondary, and . . . I didn’t . . . uh . . ., take off work to
support her.” Dawn, who shared a similar account, stated “I wish I had the time to do it for when my other son was in high school. [But] I didn’t have the time to do it . . . ’cause I worked every day.”

Angela, who has always felt that her life’s job was to help others, spent a considerable amount of time and energy advocating for children in her community and for other children in the district. She stated she is “living proof of what can happen if you lose the focus of your own family”. She continued,

I have a third son who just worry his mom to death. . . . I couldn’t get him out of high school, so he’s at home with me . . . kind of, you know, [he] just makes sure my car is heated. [He does] everything I need done for me.

Because he’s . . . what’s happened in the process of me being such a strong advocate. Schools were afraid of me, principals were afraid of me, teachers were afraid of me. So they wouldn’t even let me know that my child had concerns.

And my focus was working on trying to save the world and [I] lost him. So he did not graduate from high school. And I can’t get him to do too much of anything but to hang around me. He was my baby, and he needed me and I didn’t realize that.

Like Angela, other parents expressed feelings of hopelessness and regret. When looking at their past, many parents made statements like Clara’s, “Wow! I shoulda did this. I shoulda did that.” Shirley told me quietly,

I just really wasn’t participating back then. I was like house mom. But when I saw that they weren’t really prepared the way they should be as adults, it kind of hit me. I was, like, “You know what? I could have done a better job advocating for my children.” ’Cause I know those resources are there but they never made it to my kids and why not?

These feelings of regret were also shared by their children, who questioned their parents’ lack of involvement in their education when they were in school. Dawn laughed as she stated, “My son, my oldest son teases me, ’cause he said, ‘You know
you weren’t up there when I was going to school.’ And he teases and goes, ‘Have they made you assistant principal yet?’” According to Shirley, her oldest son is amazed every time he sees her on the news and wants to know why she was not involved when he was in school.

*Actively Involved from the Beginning.*

As I previously mentioned, some parents were actively involved in their child’s education from the very beginning. More specifically, these parents stated that their flexible schedules enabled them to spend a great amount of time at their child’s school. Shaun, who runs a daycare in her home, mentioned that when her son began school, she volunteered as much as possible. She recalled times when she attended field trips with her son’s kindergarten class and would bring her daycare kids along. Myrléne, who serves on many committees at her children’s school, said “I start [volunteering] from the very beginning when my daughter started in the Head Start . . . and what motivated me, I was the only daughter in the house and I lost my parents when I was young and . . . I don’t know that support.”

*Type of Involvement Changes*

The type of parent participation has changed. The parents in my study have gone from classroom volunteers to school-wide volunteers. In addition to being involved in traditional forms of participation, many of the participants eventually joined committees, held offices in these committees, and joined other parent
organizations outside the school. At present, all of the participants are parent advocates.

When their children began attending school, these advocates were involved in traditional forms of parent involvement, i.e., classroom volunteers and field trip chaperones. Currently, all the parents have a high level of engagement with their child’s school. All the parents are members of various school organizations such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), Parent Advisory Committee (PAC), booster parents, and the bilingual committee. Some are even members of the alumni association at their child’s school, because they, too, attended the school. Many have taken leadership roles as elected representatives on decision making and governance committees. In addition to being involved in these school organizations, the parents are also involved in parent organizations outside the school, which bring parents together from various public schools. These parents were not only active members of these organizations but also held executive offices such as president, vice president, and secretary. In some instances, parents started these organizations with the support of the school principal.

_Time as a Key Factor_

The common thread among participants and the key influential factor in the level and amount of participation is time. Parents who had minimal involvement and parents who were actively involved repeatedly mentioned that their availability played a role. Parents who had none or minimal involvement in their child’s school cited the lack of free time as the primary reason. Parents who were able to spend an
exorbitant amount of time cited the flexibility of their schedule and an abundance of free time as the primary reason. Many of these mothers were unemployed, and those who did work were self-employed. For example, Carrie is a beautician; Shaun operates a daycare center in her home where she employs others to assist with the children; and Dawn and her husband own a janitorial service, which Dawn manages from home. All the parents stated that their greatest amount of parent involvement occurred when they had flexible work schedules or were unemployed.

Recognition That ‘Things Not Right’

Noticing things were not right at their children’s school is the fourth theme. Although these parents were already activists, they did not immediately begin advocating on their children’s first day of school. Initially, many parents were unaware of any issues that needed to be addressed. Shirley said it was not “until my child got to high school and could not do algebra. I was horrified! I say ‘What the . . . ? So what was that last eight years about?’”

When I asked participants in my study to share what they felt initially motivated them to advocate, they all related similar accounts. They shared stories of how through their volunteering and other traditional forms of parent involvement, they began to notice situations at their child’s school that were not satisfactory. Dawn said,

I’m kind of a housewife type—entrepreneur. My husband owns a janitorial service, and so I’m at home during the day, which allows me to spend time at the school . . . And so, you know, I get there, I see to things. I spent a year, all last year, sitting in the Dean of Girls’ Office, and I saw. The things I saw, I was not happy about at all. The girls were out of control; [they] were very mouthy. And you know, I’d like to see some mentoring come to the school . . . something that teaches the girls . . . the girls at . . . the kids at this school.
They come and they’re smart, but something happens in the freshmen year, where they get lost—their grades start to fail. And—and after I started to see that, I said, “Well, I need to get in here, and step in there.” I talked to kids I don’t even know.

The initial situation that sparked concern at their child’s school was different for each participant. Several parents mentioned that they began to notice that even though they had always volunteered at their child’s school, their relationship with the school began to change, especially as their involvement increased. They mentioned that they were no longer welcomed and/or well received by some of the staff.

Myrléne stated that once she started to learn English, she became even more involved. She goes on to say, “They welcome you in the schools when you don’t know anything . . . but as soon as you learn . . . they close the doors for you. . . . A lot of principals don’t like to see parents to be involved at their schools. They want to decide [how you are involved].”

As I interviewed other participants, I realized that Myrléne’s experience of feeling unwelcome in the school was not unique. It appears that as parents engaged in more nontraditional forms of parent involvement and began challenging the school administration, they were no longer welcomed; other parents shared this sentiment.

I always volunteered in my kid’s classroom, from preschool up until about third or fourth grade. And then the teachers started to change like, “Umm . . . can I help you?” [Laughter]

[I said] “I’m just trying to help you out, you know. What you need me to do? [I can] just do all the little—a lil’ leg work, the bulletin boards, if you need me to assist grading papers.”

Just lil’ goofy stuff that they shouldn’t be bothered with to give them more focus on these kids (Carrie).
Dawn, who agreed, tried to rationalize the administration’s actions. “[E]ven though they say they’re for parent involvement, they’re not. I think they don’t plan to keep parents out, they just don’t think of ways to include parents”

Shirley is extremely involved in politics and education and recalled another time when she realized things were more than not right.

I went to a community group meeting, a community meeting [the alderman] was calling and they were announcing the plan. They were saying, “Ok, this is what we are going to do and because of the housing and we need to settle and dadada . . . here’s the plan for education.” And [she] gave it to us and it had like these 25 schools they were going to close [in] one year and 25 [schools they] were going to close the next year. And we were like, “When did this happen? Did anybody [know about this]?” And I was horrified. So I got on the phones and I called anybody who I thought could help me. And, you know, I asked ,’Did anybody hear about this?’” Then I found out no community group, no parent group, nobody who was actually [at the school] was consulted. And we [parents and community members] started meeting. And we had those big protests at the Board. We slept outside the Board. We would take up all the Board times [at the monthly meetings]. And it was lot of planning but that was us—a group of parents, community members. And we just stuck to our ground and was like, “You got to give us better notification. We’re not saying we don’t want change [we’re saying] we want to be a part of it”.

Frustration and Transferring

The fifth theme is frustration with the schools, which led parents to transfer their children to other schools. At one time or another, all the parents in my study mentioned that they were frustrated as they began to realized that things were not right at their child’s school. Once aware of these unpleasant situations at their children’s school, parents became infuriated. These feelings motivated many parents to take action. One course of action for many parents was to transfer their child to another school. Other parents decided to stay and fight. Karen states,
What motivates me is anger and disappointment. Oh, I’m angry but quite often. I am angry—yes. I’m angry quite often. I can’t stand people who pass the buck, blame someone else. They’re in denial of the problem. I think that that angers me. And it also angers me when [the problem is] not being addressed.

It’s like [comedian] Wanda Sykes saying you’re sick and tired of being sick and tired. And I just think to educate your child in this economy . . . it’s just a very tiresome, very planned, methodical, you know, everything . . . because trying to shop around for this utopia that may not even really be—exists. And there’s no perfect school.

Well, disappointment [motivated me], because I guess I have certain values and certain expectations. And when they are not met, when they are ignored, when they’re not valued . . . then I have to make a decision if I’m going to continue in that relationship, because I feel my participation is a core of the relationship. It’s a partnership. And so it’s just like a personal relationship. You’ve got to know when to show up, when to walk away, you’ve got to know when to run. And I think sometimes when I see that the relationship is really terminated or destroyed, it can’t be a valuable relationship, I decide to leave.

Karen was not the only parent who decided to move her child to another school. Many parents transferred their children to different schools in search of a better educational experience only to realize that the new schools suffered from the same or similar problems.

While legacy of advocacy was a reason many advocates stated as a significant influence in developing themselves into advocates, I found that many parents did not begin advocating for school issues until several years after their child had entered the school system. For some, this did not happen until their child reached high school.

Shirley, who also transferred her child a few times, said,

Let me go back. I’ve lived in [this area] since ’94. My children went to Adams, Monroe, Jackson, and Madison. Back then, I knew something was wrong. But I just, uh, being naïve and going from one school saying, “I’m not happy here, this not right,” and I would transfer them out. I wasn’t aware that was damaging my child and, you know, I just knew that this was not right. I wasn’t sophisticated enough then to say, “Ok.” and “Sit down and [let’s] figure this out.” I wasn’t there yet, so until my child got to high school and could not do algebra. I was horrified. I say, “What the . . . ? So what was that
last eight years about?” And, you know, when I saw it, I was like, “That’s it. That’s it.” Something just said, “Ok, we’re going to go in here and we’re finna sit down. What can I do?”

Like Shirley and Karen, some parents transferred their children once, twice or more times. After suffering repeated frustrations and disappointment, all decided to stay put and fight for change. They noticed that the same problems existed everywhere and changing schools was not the solution. Shirley said,

I’m going to come in here and I’m fin’ to plant my roots ’cause I’ve transferred around because I knew something just wasn’t right I couldn’t put my finger on it, but when I get to all the different schools, they were all the same and there was no parent involvement in any of them, none. So I said, “This is going to be the last stop. I’m going to make parent involvement happen here.”

Transferring and fighting for change were ways to deal with the frustration. Many parents readily admitted that if they had the option, they would send their child to private school. Even Shirley, who said, “I had an excellent experience in the public schools that’s why I believe it can work,” later on in the interview stated,

If I thought I could get my kids into St. Mel and pay or throw some money and go to a Montessori school with a Montessori curriculum—if I had it like that—I really . . . I really would do it. Seriously.

For many of the parents, paying school tuition was not an option. Many are already spending enormous amount of energy and money just to ensure that their children get to and from the school, given the distance that many of their children are required to travel. Most of the children do not attend their neighborhood school. Many parents realized that, although there were issues at their child’s school, the current school is better than their neighborhood school. Parents said that they felt trapped by the lack of choices of schools for their children to attend. It is this feeling that motivated many to advocate. Dana stated,
There are three schools, high schools, that would be considered our district schools, but I would never consider sending my son to either, either one or neither three of those schools, and that’s because of . . . academic probation, even though [my son’s school] is on that right now. But also the environment, . . . umm . . . the [long pause] surroundings, the environment—same thing. I would never send him to those schools. So he travels quite a distance to get to [his school]. And [his school] was a good pick for him

Dawn offered a larger view of why fighting at this school is so important. She said,

You know, some of the parents who do know [that our school’s on academic probation], think it’s as simple as, “Well, I’ll just take my child to [another] school.” Well, no, it’s not that simple. Where do you think your child, with below test scores, are going to go? Where do you think your child’s going to go to another school, with those test scores, and coming from a school on academic probation? The only place that you’re going to go, is a neighborhood school, or another school that’s on academic probation

*Extreme Case*

Shaun was the only parent who admitted that she could afford to place her child in a private school but made the decision to send him to public school.

We know that [my son has] gotten the most inferior education you could probably get at [his school]. And I’m struggling with [if] I should have done something different. I should have taken him out; you know what I’m saying? Because that was the answer. When I complained about [my son’s school], close people I get advice and stuff from, their answer was take him out Shaun. You can afford to send him to this school or that school or to this. But it wasn’t about [my son] again. I can do that.

And so what I did as a parent, because I do understand my first responsibility is to [my son], I paid the tutoring school, excellent tutors over there. . . . He was going to tutoring three days a week. And—but that’s what—I could do that, but I don’t have a lot of money. But I could have put him in a [private school] or in another school. And I didn’t. So that’s, you know—but that’s why I fought even harder. Because I said I can take my child, but [my son] is not going to be out here, he’s not an island out here on his own. When he gets out here, he’s going to be involved with other children and I want to see that all these kids get an education.

And then, the bottom line, damn twenty nine million dollars—you would think that was all my money. My tax dollars went into [rebuilding] that school. We have a right to demand it. I believe in public education. That is the bottom line. I can’t—I would be a hypocrite to be critical of the things that were going on and to take my child out and put him over here because I can
do that.

Now, I’ve been criticized from some of the people who I care about the most. Really criticized about the positions that I take, that I had been taking [my son] and putting [him in].

And that’s what I’ve done for a year. And I know about resources. I know how to identify resources to help him with everything that he needs. So [my son] is probably going to be okay. What about all the other children who didn’t have parents for whatever reason? And that’s my thing. That what I was telling you.

Distrust

Distrust emerged as the sixth theme and also as another source of motivation for many. There seems to be a sense of distrust about the motives and interests of the administration that compelled many of the participants to advocate. Carrie asked,

Is the system really wanting for us to succeed or just constantly fail? And they sit here and get fat off of the funds. Is that it? Cause all these highly educated people that we have over us, these um, area instructional officers, now they supposed to be dynamic. . . . . They should know what this school needs since they have to okay it.

Dana also questioned what was happening behind the scenes.

There are things being put in place; basically, they are being set up to fail. [At my son’s school] we are being set up to fail; so that somebody can come in: “Oh. Probation [for] three years. We’re gonna clean house.”

And that is what is being done slowly, little bit by little bit, because some of us are a little bit more [pause] privy and we know what’s going on. See you can fool some of the people some of the time, and that’s what’s going on. So some of us do know what’s going on.

Shirley said, “It seems to be more about the business of education instead of the real mission of education.” She warned us to be cautious and aware because she believes, “They [legislators] don’t care. It’s not a priority [for them]; it’s not their kids.”

Shirley also described an instance in which she felt that the principal was intentionally withholding information from her. Shirley is president of her school governance committee, the committee responsible for monitoring the school’s budget.
I should point out that that Shirley believes that she and the principal have a great working relationship. About this incident Shirley said, “When I saw that the principal would kind of shying away from me learning how to read the budget, I said, “Oh, okay. It’s something to this”.

Responsibility and Duty

*I have to be involved,*
*Because if,*
*if*
*I would even hate to think*
*What the results would be.*
—Dana

The women in my study are phenomenal women who are fighting for changes within their child’s school. As a researcher and as a parent with children in the public school, I wondered about what keeps these parents motivated to continue to fight for cause after cause. Many times these fights were unsuccessful. Many parents discussed their need to be involved. Phrases like “I have to be involved,” “I have to fight,” and “I need to be involved” were repeated by many participants.

During the interviews, parents seldom mentioned their child solely when they talk about for whom they were fighting. They made it clear that it was important to fight for all children. Most of the time, they used words like “kids” and “children.” Shaun, who was ridiculed by her friends for keeping her son in a public high school, said, “The way I justified my keeping [my son] in the school is that I want change for everybody.”
Clara’s sentiments were similar, “It’s helping each other, helping your child, you know, my child, your child. It’s all about the children.” When discussing advocating for the children at her son’s school, Dana said, “Well, I can sit back and do nothing, and just do a lil’ bit. Well, this is my child. I can’t do that. That’s not what God intended for us to do, you know.” She also stated, “I’m not just gone feed my child even though I see that there are four other kids at that table that’s hungry. Well, I’m sorry. I can’t help that”.

Recognizing that not every parent advocates, the parents in my study discussed the need to be involved for those parents who cannot. Angela stated, I had to fight for parents, because in that community, parents were either on drugs or—a lot of single parents, like me but, you know, young—didn’t come up to the school. So I felt that I had to be that mother in that community.

Shirley added that it’s about being there for the children and letting them know that you are there for them. She said, “I walk through the hallways. I know it sounds crazy but it is important that a parent is in the building. I’m serious. . . . It’s just. . . . It’s important that I’m here. I know these kids really need me.”

For many of these parents, it is more than a need to be involved. The participants in my study truly believe that as parents they bear the responsibility for trying to improve the educational system for their children and the children of others. Angela’s sense of responsibility stems from her loyalty to, as well as her sense of belonging to, her community. She stated, “We have to give back something because that community is what made me.” Dana stated that it is a shared responsibility between the parents and the teachers,
It’s all about leadership and coming together. But that’s why I stay involved. That and because I have to. Because if I depend on other people to do everything or educate or get the school systems together, they can’t do it without the parents. They can’t. They can’t do it without the parents’ voices, without us going to our aldermen, without us going to our congressmen. It takes us.

Shirley said, “If [the schools] don’t have parental support then they don’t get support from the Board, because no one is advocating for the school to get the support they need.” In agreement, Karen stated, “[Parents] are the voice that needs to be heard, and I would say that we have to encourage ourselves and continue to speak up because when we start becoming silent, then no one will hear us.”

The parents feel that they have the responsibility and the need to be involved; however, they even more strongly believe that they have the right to be involved. Shaun reminds us that “Now, I’m an elected official. Forget that. I’m a parent first and foremost. I’m a taxpayer second. . . . My tax dollars went into that school. We have a right to demand [a quality education].

Aware that a Better Educational Experience Exists

The eighth, and one of the most crucial themes, is parents’ awareness that a better educational experience exists, and they want it at their child’s school. These parents desire, for example, that all teachers have proper credentials and that all children not only have textbooks, but have textbooks that are current. They want the staff and the facilities to be welcoming and inviting and for the students to have access to subjects beyond the core curriculum, such as the fine arts, technology, and foreign languages. All the parents in my study know that there are other public schools in their district and in other communities that have this and more.
Many parents compare experiences in their child’s school with their experiences in public school. Interestingly, many parents attended school in the same district in which their children now attend. Parents often began statements with “When I was a child,” “Back there in the day, when I grew up, you know,” and “When I was going to school.” Shirley, who graduated from a public school, worked at a public school and now is a parent of a child at a public school, said she decided to create a parent policy at her child’s school, “Because I’ve been to schools where I saw it. You know, I saw it.”

These parents also learned about what exists in others schools from other parents and students in their social networks. Parents talked about what was happening at their nephews’ and nieces’ schools.

Many of the parents in my study attended meetings, local workshops, and national conferences that were designed for parents and educators. These conferences allowed them to meet parents from other schools and learn what successfully works at schools in their district and across the country. When they heard of innovative approaches they were motivated to advocate for the adoption of these programs and ideas at their child’s school. Dawn said,

You know, one of the things I loved to do is start a Parent Resource Center. I’ve went to Columbus, Ohio—it was an NCLB [No Child Left Behind] conference—and there were a group of people who talked about their Parent Resource Center, and it really works in Ohio. They have one in every single school. . . . Unfortunately, I’ve been told we don’t have a space in the school, but there is supposed to be space in the school for us.

Angela said,
I mean, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know that if you put some of the same thing in those schools like, for example, the one that’s closing . . . that you put in [the high performing schools], you would get a different outcome. So I continue to fight for the . . . for the people who cannot fight for
themselves and continue to be in the face of the powers that be to let them know that we know what you’re doing. And that you need to change.

Carrie said,
And in the suburbs, and they be, “Oh no, we have a full parent thing where we have our meetings.” So many parents come up—show out, show up—I’m like so, [Laughter] and that’s my goal to tell, “Girl, you would not believe the attendance” [Laughter]

Knowledgeable about the System

Being knowledgeable about the school system is the ninth theme. These parents do more than network and learn about resources at various gatherings. The parents in my study have become aware of the many underlying issues at their children’s schools. Dawn said, “Recently a half-million dollars was stolen from the school, by an employee who worked at the Board of Education.” Shaun also shared an account,

I mean, they did all kinds of stuff. The board went out of their way to have all kinds of people run for the governance committee at my child’s school. A lot of people didn’t qualify. They changed the boundaries. They literally changed the boundaries. The boundaries were a small area. I don’t remember what they were exactly off hand right now, but what they did—is to really be able to bring in more people to vote against us—they extended the boundaries.

In addition to finding out about what was going on in their children’s schools, they also gained knowledge about their rights and about the education process. As they acquired new knowledge, they thirsted for more and wondered what else they were ignorant of. Angela said,

There was this guy. He was then what they called the District Superintendent of the public schools. This man was so informative at all of his meetings, that I began to start going to every meeting that he was going to be speaking at.

He was providing information. You know, “This is what’s going on. The laws are going to be changed. You need to get this.” Then I would ask him, “Do you have it? Do you have the legislature?” And he’d give me all this information. He said a lot of people don’t like him. He’s about ninety now,
but I loved this man. He gave me information that nobody was trying to share with me. And so . . . and everywhere he went, I was there. He was like, “Are you following me?”

I said, “Yep.” Because I would get [my] baby—because I didn’t drive until . . . all three children were in high school or something. So I was on the bus just trying to go everywhere I hear he . . . he would announce where he was going to be the next time, and I knew he was very important. And then I began to start finding out that there’s laws, so I started reading the [our] state board information. Then [our state’s] school code.

Then we would just get all that information. And I just put it in my head. I just know [our state’s] school law. I just know it.

Through the process of attending meetings and learning about their rights, these parents became very knowledgeable about the school system. It is this newly acquired knowledge that parents used to hold the schools accountable. When parents talked about what was going in their children’s schools, they talked about more than their dissatisfaction with the process. They detailed inappropriate situations. They used words like “illegal” and “violation” to describe the acts they witnessed at their child’s school. Shaun said, “The Board of Education did everything to stop my child’s school from having a [governance committee], and by law, we’re required to have [one].”

Study participants also became well versed in the vernacular used by education professionals. This same vernacular at one time served as a way to marginalize them and to make information inaccessible to them. During the interviews, the participants knew and spoke of the individuals who hold positions at various levels in the school system: school, district, state and the federal level. Sometimes during the interviews I had to ask them to clarify some of the many acronyms they used or tell me who it was they were talking about because I was unfamiliar with the names. These parents have gained an invaluable amount of
knowledge about their rights, school laws, and how to maneuver through the system.

Once, before a speaking engagement, Angela was introduced with, “If there’s anything you need to know about the public school she knows it.” Myrène stated that she is “always looking for information, not just for me, but to help others.”

_Dawn’s Biggest Fight_

The biggest fight right now was the vote [for a new principal]. We had a candidate forum on a Wednesday. . . . I thought that we would have a meeting on Friday to vote for the candidate. So when we were leaving—it was over probably about quarter to ten that night—we were looking for the posting. You know, it had to be posted. It had to be posted at 4:00 in order to hold a meeting at 4:00 on Friday. So we were going out the door, and the chairperson’s looking for the posting. Well, with me and . . . and another rep, and he said, “It’s not posted.” And I said, “It’s not posted there, there’s no meeting.” And so, I left out. . . . On Friday, about 4:30, I got a phone call from a teacher who said, “Why aren’t you up here? The Dean of Girls is walking down the hall talking about the two rebel rousers.” And that was me and this other rep, who’s been fighting the whole time. “They’re not here, the rebel rousers aren’t here, we’re going to elect a principal.” I said, “Well there’s no meeting.” He said, “Don’t tell me. I’m here, and they’re meeting.” So we show up, they’re holding an illegal meeting. We sit down there to determine how things are going to be voted on, and we sit down and we elect a new principal. The parents are upset, because they want to know, what was the big rush; why weren’t we notified. Well, I know the person who posted the meeting meant well, but it actually got posted after the forum at 10:00, about 10:00 at night, when everybody was going home. So no one actually saw it. And so when we go there, you know, one of the questions was, “Well, why can’t we wait until Monday—we have such a big decision to make. And it was, well we’ve been waiting all this time; we need to elect a principal.” And it’s just been . . . it’s been a fight.

We went down to the Board; we talked about how this meeting was illegal; how the parents didn’t get a chance to voice their concerns. Then it’s . . . it’s been a big mess. There’s an investigation that’s being held right now. There’s a meeting with the president of the Board to talk about, you know, what has happen through the process.
Inspired by Other Parent Advocates

Being inspired by other parent advocates is the tenth theme. Parents also mentioned that watching other parents advocate inspired them. Many of these parents want to follow in the footsteps of these advocates, their mentors. Clara expressed her admiration for Dawn, a participant in this study.

I was in a meeting and [Dawn] came in and she spoke up, and she was voted that day for the president because she expressed her feelings about the school and how she wants to get involved. [Pause] She . . . is a person that speaks her mind. A lot of us want to help but are afraid to speak up to help. But she’s not afraid to voice her opinion; she’s not afraid to take challenges. And she wants to work for the better of the good for our children. To me, some people are gifted to speak their opinion and to work for the better of the good. And I think she’s best with that and I am a follower of her. I would like to be a follower of her because I, too, you know, want the change, but I’m not a big speaker. And, supporting her, she’s like my voice of what I believe in.

Shirley, who was mentioned by several of the other participants in the study as a person they admired, talked about an advocate she had the opportunity to meet.

I really learned a lot from her and I love her to death; and I really wish I could do what she does with a budget. I love her. Even though she doesn’t have any children anymore in the schools, she’s still a real big advocate in the schools. The fact that she is not scared to go talk to anybody. I get intimidated. . . . But, I mean, she can go right to the source. You know, I’ve seen her talk to people I hate. I’m like, “Oh, I’m not going to go up there.” You know, she’s just up there loving it. I know I need to do this a little bit longer but she’s just not scared. And she’s like, “I ain’t got a thing to lose any more They’re cheating these children and you gotta fight!” I love that about her. I would love to be like her.
Leadership Traits

Possessing leadership traits is the eleventh theme. These parents are not only activists, but are also leaders. They possess many traits that are characteristic of leaders:

- They are recognized and known by others because of their actions and their level of expertise about the education system.
- They exude self-efficacy
- They are resourceful as they seek out knowledge and network with others who have knowledge/power.

Recognized and Well Known for Their Advocacy

Because of their frequent volunteerism, many of the participants are well known throughout their community and in their children’s school. After spending many hours at their child’s school, some parents like Dawn have developed an identity separate from their child. They are no longer recognized as “Joe’s mom,” but are now recognized as a person who helps out at the school. Dawn, who is often at her child’s school, said that many of the students at her son’s school “don’t even know that [he] is my child.”

Shaun, a successful advocate at her son’s school, says that parents whom she doesn’t know frequently come up to her and congratulate her on all the progress she has made through her advocacy. Angela is also well known at her child’s school. She said that one of the parents, who happens to be “the senator’s wife was very upset about the school’s climate. And said that she wants me to address this. . . . So she said, ‘Yeah, I’ve heard about you and I would want you to do some stuff for me.’”
It is the recognition of this commitment and dedication that assisted Myrléne in obtaining her U.S. citizenship. Myrléne shared,

In June of last year, I got my residence. It’s not just that I feel, “Ok, I’m happy in . . .” but, in my case, it was letters from everywhere to the judge who decides. I was in front of the judge like two, three times and he got the letters from people. I didn’t even know that many people know me.

Self-efficacy

But once I went to their meetings
And I’m like—
All
These
Idiots.
If they can do it,
I can do it too!
—Carrie

These parents exude self-efficacy. They believe that they can affect change; no matter how slow the process. They made statements like, “I know that I could bring something to the table” (Dawn) “I’m going to make a difference” (Angela).

Although they have been called names and have had to deal with many negative repercussions, they continue to fight. They have been called rebel rousers, Aunt Jemima, pests, troublemakers, and crazy by school administrators and others; and, in a few instances, their children have experienced negative repercussions as a result of their parents’ activism. Yet, they still fight; these parents are determined to seek change.

When faced with issues at their child’s school, these parents sought answers. They are courageous as they confront various authority figures: principals, CEOs, and others. Shaun said, “I was going to try to find out and I’m going to talk to everybody
and ask everybody and do something until I get the right answers.” Karen said, “I make them deal with things that they’re uncomfortable with doing.”

**Resourceful**

These parents are *resourceful*. They enlist the help of students, parents, teachers, principals, and aldermen in order to achieve their goals. Although they share stories of when they were fighting alone, they recognize that in order to be successful they need supporters. Dana said, “We need legislators. We need some people in key places to do. They need to do. We can only get the ball rolling so far.” Shirley said,

I try to support the administration and her vision and her mission to try to bring the school up. I know I’m not an educator, so I really depend on the teachers and the administrators to do what they are suppose to do if they come; and so if tell me they need for me to do something or say something, I will.

Shirley has a great working relationship with the principal at her children’s school. So did many parents, at first. Shaun said she has a great relationship with many of the teachers and parents; “I tried really, really hard the first year to work with the principal.” Since that year, her relationship with the principal has soured.

These parents are *team builders*. When necessary, they sought help from individuals outside the school, individuals whom they viewed as having the power to assist them. Shirley said, “I’ve gone out to talk to the AIOs [Area Instructional Officer], talk to the Board, talk to curriculum specialist.” Shaun shared that once she, along with other parents, had to seek the assistance of legal counsel in order to ensure that the school kept its promise to put in place a governing board on which parents would have seats. Shaun said,

I talked to the law department at the Board. . . . I fought, I fought. I went to the Board on many occasions and questioned the CEO. I got an attorney to
fight. I was ostracized a whole lot. But it didn’t mean anything because when you know, you believe you’re doing the right thing, you have to do what you believe is the correct thing. Because anybody who knew me knew that I’m not going to back down.

When officials did not give the parents a response that they believed satisfactory, the parents were not afraid to question them. Shaun said,

I went to the Board and asked [the CEO of the public school board] face-to-face, I said, “Do you consider [my son’s school] a successful school?” And he said, “Well, compared to all the other schools in the community.” “I don’t appreciate you spending twenty million of our tax dollars to revamp the school and then tell me compared to the . . . Why don’t you compare it to the [top public schools in the city].” So that was how I started being an advocate the way I am at [my child’s school].

Carrie, who is not intimidated by anyone, shared a story about a conversation she had with some Board officials who told her, “Oh, yeah, we know what you going through. We went through that same thing [when we were parents in the school system].” She responded to them,

So why in the hell am I going through it then? Why didn’t you clean it up when you was here? And since you in the seat, to clean it up now, why you sayin’—’cause of your job? Have you lost? Have you got paid to shut up now? You was here. And since you in the seat, are you part the problem? And not the solution?

Carrie goes on to say that the only people she sees willing to speak up and “stick their head out” are parent advocates like Shirley; but, unfortunately, they are not the ones on the governing boards.

In addition to possessing these qualities, the parents are also vigilant. Even when things are not going as they want, they are determined not to give up. Shirley said,
We lost that fight, and I said, “You know what?, I am not done. . . . I’m not going to scream and shout, but I’m not going anywhere. This is not right. So either we’re going to work it out or we’re going to fight it out. We’re going to agree to disagree, and I’m going to get my way as far as those kids are concerned.” They could not stop me. I tell [the teachers] all the time, if your child was in this school going here, you would be kicking down doors telling these people because you know what they need.

Want Something Better for Their Kids

The desire for their children to have a better life is the twelfth theme. The parents in the study want what’s best for their children. Many of the parents would like their children to graduate from college and be successful. They want their children to become entrepreneurs. Clara said, “We want them to be in the corporate world. We want them to reach their highest potential in education and to, ah, make something good of themselves because they’re our future.” In response to what motivates her to advocate, Shirley says, “knowing that my kids will be successful. I just know in my heart education is the key.”

Passion

I love my kids.
I love kids, period.
If I can help, I will

That’s why I stay involved
That—

—Dana

Passion is the final theme. Sentiments like Dana’s that has been expressed by other parents as a reason for their motivation. The parents expressed a general love
and genuine interest in kids. They talk about how it is their passion for children and their education that drives them. Shaun said,

Well, because what I . . . what I’ve been consistent in is caring about children. Everything’s not just about my child. It’s been about children, and my passion has grown even more now. I mean, I can take a breath of fresh air because my son is on his way out . . . . But it’s not going to stop me from being involved in the community and being involved in children’s lives.

Many parents said that even when their child is no longer in the school system they will remain involved because they recognize that there’s “a lot of things to do out there” (Myrléne) Clara shared,

Once you start the fight, you know, you want to continue the fight. Because we are fighting for children and not just our sons and daughters, you know. So we’re fighting for every child up there at the school and a fight to the finish, and we got a long way to go

Other Sources of Motivations

Many of the parents talk about why they fight so hard. They talk about the lack of choices and what could happen if they did not advocate. Karen said, “You should participate because it eventually effects your [property value] if you decide to sell.”

Dana and other parents fear that “if you are an absentee parent, your child might suffer.” Angela says she does not want the other children “who get lost in the crunches to kill” her son. When the mayor of her city asked her why she fights so hard, Angela replied,

Because it’s personal. And it is. I want to make sure that [my sons] and all of the kids get an education so that they won’t have to come in my house and break in my house and take the things that I’ve worked so hard for. So that’s how I got started with all this. And I said I have to fight.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This study has examined the common characteristics and motivations of parent advocates. In this chapter I will: (1) discuss the analysis of the findings and themes that have emerged as they relate to the questions guiding my study and previous research, (2) draw on concepts of critical theory to discuss my conclusions, and (3) discuss implications for further research, the field of adult education, and practice.

Question 1. What are the common characteristics and personal traits of successful parent advocates?

Some of the characteristics common among the participants in my study, are:

1. They are influenced by others who have a legacy of advocacy.
2. The participants have a history of volunteerism and activism.
3. In addition to their advocacy, they are actively involved in traditional forms of parent involvement at their children’s school.
4. They are very knowledgeable about the workings of the school system, their rights, and their children’s rights.
5. They possess leadership traits.

Legacy of Advocacy

As children, the women in my study were surrounded by adults who advocated for various causes, including education. Each participant recounted memories of a family member, usually her mother, who was involved in advocating;
their parents served as role models. The findings suggest that having their parents and others model advocacy helped, consciously or unconsciously, to shape and influence the advocates into the persons they are today. Furthermore, the participants did not allude to being told that they needed to fight for these causes. The willingness to fight seemed to be an innate part of them. This finding is similar to that of Solorzano (2001) who examined the activism of Chicana/Chicano student activists.

Participants also stated that they were influenced by the tumultuous times of the 1960s, during which many people participated in riots, protests, and other forms of activism as part of larger social and political movements, such as the Civil Rights movement and women’s liberation movement. What happened during the Civil Rights movement is being mirrored in their lives as these advocates carry their parents’ torch and continue the struggle for justice, equality, and a better education.

Hearing the civil rights leaders’ message of justice and peace, along with their familial legacy of advocacy, served as an inspiration and source of motivation for the participants to live a life full of social and political activism.

**History of Volunteerism and Activism**

The participants in my study were no strangers to volunteering. All had a history of volunteering in their churches and communities, as well as for charities and other organizations. In addition, many of them were social, political, or community activists who fought for causes like affordable housing, immigration reform, and the redress of other injustices. Some of the participants have even traveled to their state’s capital to participate in lobbying activities.
**Actively Involved in Traditional Forms of Parent Involvement**

Due to the fact that they were already involved in their communities, it was only natural that they took an interest in their child’s lives, including their school. Most of the participants began volunteering at their child’s school when their child entered kindergarten. Realizing the importance of and the need for their involvement as their children got older, the parents increased the level of their involvement, which is contrary to past research that states “by the 4th grade, parental involvement tends to decline” (Children’s Aid Society, 2003, p. 2). The parents in my study made no distinction between their involvement in their community and in their children’s school. Their goal was to achieve a fairer, more compassionate world.

The parents not only had a history of participating in traditional forms of parent involvement at their children’s school, but also continued these forms of involvement simultaneously while they advocated. In fact, as their child aged, the amount of time these parents spent advocating also increased.

Parents’ activities and involvement progressed in stages similar to those in a model developed by Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock & Lecklider (1999). This hierarchical model categorizes into four levels the types of partnerships that a parent can have with the school:
Table 1. Empowerment Model for Family-School Partnerships (Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock & Lecklider, 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Sample Involvement Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; level</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Parent-teacher conferences, chaperoning school functions, reading school newsletters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; level</td>
<td>Family Development</td>
<td>Participating in workshops designed to improve various parenting skills such as parent-child communication, homework assistance, and healthcare training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; level</td>
<td>Community Outreach</td>
<td>Attending PTA/PTO meetings, assisting other families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; level</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Serving as a member or officer of local, state or national organizations that directly impact the policies and administration of their school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The parents in my study evolved from first-level activities (communication), to third-level activities (community outreach), and to the fourth-level (advocacy). The move into the fourth and highest level, advocacy, did not happen for many of the participants until their child reached high school or until they had a second or later child in the school system. None of the participants mentioned participating in activities from the model’s second level, family development. Participants were comfortable with their skills as parents and did not feel the need to attend workshops designed to improve their parenting skills. Instead, they focused on participating in
events that would lead to improvements at their children’s school, which was the source of their anguish.

Knowledgeable

The parents in my study are very knowledgeable about the education system. They make great efforts to stay informed on issues affecting their schools and its surrounding community. These parents have become familiar with the workings of the system, the many players who are involved in decision making, and the many laws and policies that are in place to protect and oversee their children’s education.

In my conversations with them, it was evident that they were also aware of the underhanded acts of some school administrators and others. Participants detailed how the schools were violating their rights as parents and as citizens. They used the words “criminal” and “illegal” to describe the actions they witnessed.

Leadership Traits

The parents in my study are not only activists but they are also leaders. These parent advocates possess many traits that are characteristic of leaders:

- They are resourceful as they seek out knowledge and network with others who have knowledge and power.
- They are recognized and known by others because of their actions and their level of expertise about the education system.

Through various conferences, workshops, community organizations, parent networks, and advocacy organizations, the participants in my study have connected
with parent advocates from other schools within their district and from schools across the country. Many are on a first-name basis with influential people throughout their school system, i.e., principals, region officers, the president of their Board of Education, and the CEO of their Board of Education. In addition, some participants are acquainted with their alderman, mayor, and people in positions of authorities throughout the state and national educational offices. Goleman (2000) reported that leaders have excellent social skills and are proficient in managing relationships and building networks.

These advocates use the many people in their networks to aid them in their advocacy. These connections often provided my participants with more knowledge about the workings of the system. Because of their knowledge and actions, these parent advocates have become well known throughout their community, particularly in their schools. They are recognized by others as experts on parents’ rights.

Question 2. What common experiences and motivations lead parents to advocate not only for their child but for other children?

What motivates parents to advocate? As previously discussed in my review of the literature, sources of motivation will be divided into two categories: external motivations (e.g., environment and the school system) and internal motivations (e.g., confidence levels and feelings of empowerment).
External Motivations

Past research, which looked at parent advocacy for children with special needs, suggests that external factors that motivate parents to advocate are the school, their environment, others, and the fact that they realized that a significant number of children are in the same situation as their own child (Arriaza, 2004, Salon 2001).

In my research, I have found these motivations hold true for the population I researched, i.e., parents who are advocating for children who have not been labeled with special needs. More specifically, I found the parent advocates in my study were motivated to advocate because:

1. They recognized things were not right
2. They knew a better educational experience existed
3. They were frustrated
4. They distrusted the school administration
5. They were motivated by the actions of other parent advocates whom they viewed as exemplary role models.

Recognition that ‘Things Were Not Right’

As I mentioned previously, the parents in my study were actively involved in their child’s school. These parents were classroom moms, field trip chaperones, lunchroom volunteers, etc. Because of their active role as volunteers, they spent many hours at their child’s school.

They stated that it was while volunteering at the school that they began to notice that things were not right. Dissatisfied with the conditions at their child’s
school, the parents in my study took action. The course of action was different for parents of elementary school children versus parents of high school children.

Parents of elementary school students transferred their children to other schools. Often, the new school was in the same neighborhood or region, and, in every case, the new school was within the same district. Determined to enroll their child in a school that would provide a quality education in a safe and nurturing environment, many parents uprooted their child more than once. Each time, the parents feared that the move would negatively affect their child socially and emotionally, as the child had to leave old friends behind and adjust to a new school, new teachers, and classmates.

After further analysis, it became apparent that the parents whose children were in high school had already taken their child on the journey of transferring them from one school to another while their child was enrolled in elementary school. This time, when parents realized that things were not right, they decided not to transfer their child. They made this decision, not because they were uncaring, but because they were well aware that their options were limited. There were not as many high schools from which to choose. So parents began looking for ways to make the best out of what they knew would be a short experience, i.e., four years of high school versus nine years of grammar school.

The process of searching for a new school, transferring their child to that school in hopes of a better education, and being disappointed when they found out that this school had similar problems eventually only exhausted and frustrated both groups of parents. These experiences taught them that the problems they faced were
not unique to their child’s school, but instead were affecting other schools in their
district and, even more specifically, disproportionately affecting the schools in their
community. These parents ultimately realized that it was the school system that was
to blame for many of the problems, including the great disparities that existed among
the schools.

Knew A Better Educational Experience Existed

One of the main reasons parents transferred their child during their elementary
years was that the awareness that better public schools existed in their district and
they believed their child was entitled to this better education. To these parents, “better
schools” mean schools in which all teachers have the proper credentials, all students
have current textbooks, and the school building and its atmosphere are safe and
welcoming to both parents and students.

The problem these parents soon realized was that these better schools were not
accessible, or easily accessible, to them. The public schools that the parents believed
were ideal were out of their reach. These schools had geographic boundaries that
automatically excluded participants’ children, selective enrollment by lottery or
testing, or were simply too far for them or their children to travel.

Many of those parents stated that if they could afford to home school or send
their child to a private school, they would not hesitate. In my study, there were only
two parents who were able to enroll their child in a private school. Due to financial
constraints, one of the parents re-enrolled her child in a public school after one year.
Although the other parent could afford to send her son to a private school, she made
the decision to enroll and keep him in a public school and fight for all children. All the parents believed that they should be able to send their child to the public school in their neighborhood and be assured that their child was being educated, because, according to them, their tax dollars were helping fund the schools.

Frustration

This combination of knowing that better educational opportunities existed and the frustration of not being able to access those opportunities motivated these parents to fight. They also realized that the entire community is and will be affected by the lack of opportunities for these children, as these children will soon be adult members of society.

Most parents would have been discouraged by these circumstances; however the participants in my study used their frustration as a catalyst to become more involved at their child’s school. They began to join formal parent organizations, like their PTA and PTO, and also began running for office for various committees, including governing and decision-making bodies. As a result, these parents’ networks grew and their knowledge of the process grew. It is during this time that they began to focus even more on creating change that affected more than just their child.

Some of the parents used the knowledge they gained from these associations and from other parents to assist them in fighting for change at their child’s school. Putnam (2000) reported that participation in civic responsibilities, like holding public schools accountable, has been found to increase for parents as they develop
connections and relationships with others through their memberships in community and formal groups and organizations (as cited in Arriaza 2004).

Distrust

Up to this point, the parents had a great working relationship with the teachers, principal, and staff of the school. As the parents took on new roles as members and officers in these organizations, they discussed how their relationship with the school and its staff began to change. These parents no longer felt welcome at the school. Parents found that administrators were uncooperative and intentionally withheld information the parents needed to perform their leadership roles in school organizations.

These and other actions taken by the administration led parents to distrust the school’s administrators. As indicated in the literature, parents were only welcome and allowed to be involved in school activities when those activities were approved of by the school and supported the school in ways the administration desired.

As the schools resisted the parents’ efforts to work with them toward school improvement, parents became even more motivated to continue to fight for change. Parents began realizing that the schools were not only resistant to change but may not even desire it. At this point, parents began to seek information outside the school but still within the school system. On this level, the district level, parents soon realized that school officials did not really have their children’s interest at heart and that their interests seemed to be more self-serving.
Meeting Other Parent Advocates

Reluctant to trust those associated with the school system, these parents sought help and answers from community organizations. The parents found renewed strength as their network and knowledge of the system continued to grow and as they began to meet parent advocates from other schools, some of whom were more seasoned and some who were also lobbying. Watching these experienced advocates and listening to their stories of battles and successes served to motivate the participants even more. Many of the study participants said they wanted to be like these other advocates—not afraid to challenge those in positions of authority.

Coincidentally, many of the advocates that the parents idolized were also participants in this study. Snowballing, the process in which participants identify potential participants was used for this research. There are so few parents advocating in this district that participants unknowingly recommended that I interview advocates who were already participants in my study. This confirms what the participants told me, that the network of advocates is very small; hence, their need to be extremely supportive of each other.

Conclusion of External Motivations

Jill Bloom (1992) stated that parents may go from case advocacy to class advocacy. While this may be true for some, this was not substantiated by my research. Advocacy is defined as “an on-going process aiming at change of attitudes, actions, policies and laws by influencing people and organizations with power,
systems and structures at different levels for the betterment of people affected by the issue” (ICASCO, 2002, p. 12). More specifically, parent advocacy is “standing up for [your] rights as parents to ensure that all children get the best education possible” (Bloom, 1992, p. 23).

Although the parents in my study initially were concerned about their own child, they were not fighting for change that would affect others. They were not trying to change policies or the system. They were looking for the best opportunities for their child, which better fits under the general category of parenting. When they realized that “better” seemed to be out of their reach, they began to look for ways to make changes at their child’s school. Thus, it was the environment, the schools in their community, the choices that they had or lacked, and the school system that motivated these parents to advocate.

*Internal Motivation*

Parents were not only motivated by external factors. The parents in my study were also motivated by the following internal factors: (a) they felt a sense of responsibility and (b) self-efficacy.

According to Spickard (n.d.), when an activist is motivated out of a sense of responsibility this is categorized as a cathekontic motivation. While current literature (see Bloom, 1992; Sarason, 1995; Shaheen & Spence 2002) states that parents have the responsibility to hold the public schools accountable and that advocating requires parents to have “an ever evolving sense of purpose and responsibility to the larger
social milieu” (Shepard & Rose, 1995, p. 377), it fails to acknowledge and explain the development of parents who do.

Many participants said that as children they were taught to speak out when they saw injustices. Several parents stated that their religious and spiritual beliefs played a key role in their need to advocate. It is this sense of responsibility in combination with other factors that motivates the parents in my study to advocate. Similar to research that investigated the motivation of traditional parent involvement, my research shows that parents’ perception of their role in the school community serves as a strong motivation.

It was not only this sense of responsibility that served as an internal motivation, but also the fact that the parents in my study believed in themselves. They believed they had the skills, knowledge, and drive to advocate. This finding is similar to the findings of Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) and Nassi and Abramowitz (1980). In their examination of the motivation behind parents’ involvement in secondary schools in Quebec, Deslandes and Bertrand found Bandura’s self-efficacy theory explained this reason. Bandura’s (1994) self-efficacy theory suggests that people must first believe in themselves as a person capable of producing the desired effect in their lives. In this case, changes within their children’s school. Nassi and Abramowitz (1980) looked at political activism and found that activists who believed “in their ability to influence political events” were motivated to participate in greater political activities (p. 364).
Question 3. What keeps these parents motivated and inspired to advocate for one issue after another?

The parents in my study have been advocating for years. Sometimes their efforts have been successful, other times they have not. Although many of the children will no longer be in the school system to reap the benefits of their parents’ advocacy, the parents in my study continue to fight. I have found that two things sustain their motivation: passion and the hope and belief that change is possible.

Many parents in my study used the word passion to describe their feeling about education. These parents get excited when they consider the promise the future holds for children if they receive a quality education. The fight is worth it. They want their children and all children to have a chance at having a great career and a great life, and they believe this is possible through education.

These parents also have the hope and belief that these schools are capable of change. Similarly, Chandler and Jones (2003) interviewed women working for social change and found that the belief “that a better world is possible” motivated and inspired these political activists (p. 75). This belief is probably due to the era during which the participants were born. They have lived through struggles and seen change happen. Consequently, they believe that positive change can happen for them, even if it does not happen until later. They understand it is a slow process and it is because of their belief that change is possible that many parents state their intent to continue their advocacy even after their child has left the school.
[I]n a society such as ours . . . there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.

—Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*

Parent advocacy is an attempt to alter the various power dynamics in the public school system. The concept of power is key and central to any discussion of resistance and change. Power is never static, but rather is continuous and exists everywhere due to the fact that “it is exercised through innumerable points” (Foucault as cited in Gutting, 1994, p. 19).

Cervero, Wilson, and Associates (2001), “have described the world we hope to change as one dominated by the struggle for knowledge and power” (p. 278). Thus, in order to comprehend fully the motivations and experiences of parent advocates, underlying issues of power will be explored through the lens of Foucault. Michel Foucault (1980), a French social theorist states,

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there. . . . Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (p. 98)

Although school administrators and researchers repeatedly state their desire for parents to become partners in their child’s education, the parents in my study found that this is not entirely true. On the contrary, the parents realized that as they tried to embody this idea of a partnership by increasing their involvement and looking
for ways to assist administration in creating change, they were no longer welcome in the schools.

As the parents took on new roles and responsibilities as members and officers of school organizations, it became apparent that the schools administration felt threatened and pressured. Administrators used their positions of authority to discourage parents’ involvement, which in turn created a hostile environment. Principals at these schools resorted to tactics such as name calling and intimidation and they warned teachers and other parents not to communicate with these advocates in an attempt to alienate them from their school community.

These principals also sought ways to exploit current policies in ways that protected their interests. Knowing that parent representatives on governing council must have a child currently enrolled in the school, some principals endeavored to have the children of parent advocates expelled. Foucault (1980) states that “The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (p. 52). As we can see in this situation, principals used their knowledge of the workings of the system to try to silence the voices of these parents.

Instead of focusing all their energy on creating systemic change at their child’s school, these parents found themselves expending an enormous amount of energy protecting their child and making the schools fulfill its government-mandated responsibility. Section 1118 of the No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110, 2002) states that schools must have parental involvement. Furthermore the state in which these parents reside has also mandated that each school have a governing
council composed of parents, teachers, and community representatives; and the president’s seat, which many of my study’s participants hold, must be held by a parent. These councils were established to give parents voice, and principals were given the responsibility of ensuring that these councils thrive and function. Yet, principals are often the ones sabotaging them.

In an attempt to counter these acts designed to maintain the status quo and support the system, these advocates sought to educate themselves. They began familiarizing themselves with various education laws and policies, particularly those that pertained to parents’ right. The language that had once been used by school administrators to exclude and belittle these parents was now being used to benefit them as they engaged in dialogue with school officials on the local, district and national level, as well as with their public officials. As a result of their exposure and notoriety, these parents have become well known as leaders, activists, and experts in the schools and in the larger community.

The knowledge gained not only empowers the parents but also sets the foundation for the work that lies ahead. “Power relations entail knowledge. . . . Just as power must be exercised to work so, too freedom and knowledge are active states.” (Rabinow, 1994, p. 206)

Critiquing the System

The Administrators

Many of parents in my study want to know why administrators at their school are not using their positions of power to create meaningful change. Recognizing that
many of the teachers and staff are parents themselves, these parent advocates questioned the school’s staff about the actions they would take if this were their child’s school. The principals’ lack of respect and recognition that they too are intellectuals is very upsetting.

Furthermore, as the principals continue to demean and devalue the ideas, knowledge and experiences these parents bring, they fail to see how “their individual well-being [is] integrally bound up with that of the collective” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 39). They fail to use their experience as parents to work with officials at their own child’s school, to be compassionate, and to be more sensitive to the presence of oppression. This concept of our identity at work being separate from our identity in our personal lives is what Karl Marx referred to as alienation (Brookfield, 2005) and serves as a barrier to large-scale social change.

Principals should use their positions of power to assist their fellow citizens, and especially parents, in working toward a common vision that will benefit all. Although it may seem to these principals that “they are following their own will, [they appear to be] unaware that their will itself is conditioned and manipulated” by the system (Fromm, 1976 as cited in Brookfield, 2005, p. 151). The actions, decisions, and practices of these principals only serve to reflect and support the established system. Thus, the marginalization faced by parents is not solely from the dearth of research literature and school administrators, it is also from other parents.
The parents in my study have not only been critical of the administrators at their schools, but they have also been skeptical of the intent of their public school system. As graduates of this public school district themselves, these parents have been aware for sometime of the disparities that exist among the public schools in their district. Until recently, these parents believed that the reasons for these disparities were many and complex; however, based on their observations through their child’s experience with the system, they believe the situation has progressively declined. As a result, the parents began questioning the motives of the school officials. When the parents in my study became more involved in leadership roles at their schools, they became privy to information about the workings of the school system. Because of what they witnessed, these parents now believe that the deplorable conditions that affect primarily the schools in their community are the direct result of corruption, mismanagement, and underhanded dealings.

As they continue their fight, these parents critically reflect on these issues and ask themselves:

- How could anyone possibly imagine that these students have the opportunity to succeed?
- Are these schools designed for these students to fail?
- Whose interest is being served by the current structure of the school system?
Further analysis of my data revealed that, while the parents have engaged in critiquing the system, they are not trying to change the system. They merely want to alter its current state so they can reap the many benefits they believe that education promises and to which they are entitled. In other words, they “strive toward social justice within the existing social systems and social conventions” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 318).

While they are not trying to change it, the participants in my study do believe that the entire public school system needs to be revamped. Their decision, however, to focus on creating change at only their child’s school is a direct result of the hopelessness these parents feel. They do not believe it is possible to transform a system as large as the public school system. Seehwa Cho, a professor at the University of St. Thomas, states that this response is hegemony in the working. “Pointing out that when the possibility of large-scale social upheaval is foreclosed even by those with activist inclinations, there is little need for the state to make complicated arrangements to retain power and enforce control” (cited in Brookfield, 2005, p. 43).

The parents are limited in the scope of their vision, as they still hold onto their unquestioned set of beliefs that if their child is given the opportunity to have a great education, that he/she will be able to attain a high-paying career, big house, and other successes they believe are sure to follow. They fail to take into account numerous factors, such as race, gender, and class.
These beliefs and assumptions serve to support and perpetuate the existing system. Furthermore, for these parents, the ultimate goal of their child’s education is material gain, and this is due in part because in “a commodified world, people develop their identity and calculate their sense of self worth in purely economic terms” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 70). This “narcissistic pursuit of private ends” (p. 84), regardless of consequence, is one of the many results of a society based on capitalism.

Implications for Research

Current literature is inundated with research on traditional forms of parental involvement and its effect on the parents, children, and the school system. My research explored the motivations and characteristics of parent advocates in the public school system. Yet, more research is needed to explore the various aspects of parent advocacy, the highest form of parental involvement (Shepard, Trimberger, McClintock, & Lecklider, 1999). It is apparent in my research that participants’ upbringing, spirituality, and exposure to the Civil Rights movement served as powerful influences and each of these are worthy of further exploration. Following are questions that merit future research:

- What does parent advocacy look like and the phenomenon of parents who advocate for all children?
- How does spirituality influence activism, and, even more specifically, what role does spirituality plays in parent advocacy?
- How are the children of advocates affected by their parents’ activism?

My findings suggest that the parents’ activism is the results of a
cyclical process. Parents in my study are influenced by their parents and their children seem to be finding their own voices as they speak out against injustices.

- Does parent advocacy and its motivation differ by context, i.e., urban, suburban, rural, parochial, public?
- What motivates adults with no children to advocate for change? While conducting this research, I came across many adults who had no children in the school, some of which had no children at all, who were advocating alongside the parents in my study.
- How did the Civil Rights movement impact parents who are advocating for change at their children’s school?
- How does support, or lack of support, affect one’s role in activism?
- In what ways do the “isms” (e.g., racism, classism, ageism) and their intersection affect parent advocacy?
- How do school administrators learn to “interpret their experiences in ways that emphasize their connectedness to others and [how does this] lead them to see the need for solidarity and collective organization” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 31)?
- How has and how is hegemony working to limit the ability of parent advocates to affect real change?
Implications for Adult Education

“Adult Education was first institutionalized in the United States as a means to guarantee that United States citizens would have the skills and knowledge to participate in this democracy” (Peterson, 1991, p. 174). The public school system was originally developed to offer quality education to all. As citizens and owners of the school system parents have the responsibility not only to hold the school system accountable, but also to demand change. In order for this to happen, parents must educate themselves about their rights and the educational system.

The current field of adult education encompasses literature and research on various political and social movements that aim to improve the lives of marginalized adults. Nevertheless, there is an imminent need for the field to address the adult’s role and responsibility in improving the circumstances in which children, the future, are raised. This responsibility lies with all adults, not just parents.

Implications for Practice

Clearly this country needs a great deal of public education about how public education is [organized and operated]. Even if one were to say that the system should be changed, our democratic tradition requires that any changes be made by an informed public. . . . What happens at the community and neighborhood level will determine the education our children receive and the system which it is governed.

—(NSBA, 1975, p.3 as cited in Heffner, A Field Based Evaluation of a Training Model for Parent Advocates

In their book, Power in Practice, Cervero, Wilson and Associates (2001) propose three starting points as foundational for understanding the shifting terrain of work and for mapping our actions in adult education:
1. Adult education is a significant site in the struggle for knowledge and power.

2. There is a reciprocal relationship between adult education and power.

3. Adult educators are social activists

With this in mind the following are implications for practice:

1. Adult education programs that target parents or have a high population of parents should include curricula that will educate parents about the school system, their rights, and various means of advocacy. These programs should help parents analyze the system, and they should help them look at the people who do not care, the people who intrude, the people who misuse their authority . . . by doing this we can encourage people to be outward looking, to be active and activist. We can help them focus their anger on the cause of their anger. And we can set up situations in which we and the people we are working with think, plan, learn and decide action” (Newman, 1994, p. 144 as cited in Brookfield, 2005, p. 113).

2. Neighborhood discussion groups or study groups should be formed to create a network that allows parents to dialogue and learn from one another. Invitations should especially be made to administrators who are also parents in an attempt to help them realize their interconnectedness with other parents. Through these groups, parents have the opportunity to learn “the possibilities of their power through sharing knowledge, experiences, tactics, strategies, successes, and failures” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 48)

3. In K-12 programs and higher education, it is imperative to reinstate curricula and discussions that focus on the meaning of democracy and the
role of civic responsibility. Many people in the past, through great effort and pain have paved the way for the freedom we enjoy today. As citizens in a democratic society, it is our responsibility to maintain the positive aspects of our system and strive to improve conditions for future generations.

4. On the university level, programs designed for K-12 administrators should encourage their students to approach future administrative positions with sensitivity, compassion, and respect for parents, as we strive toward a common vision of quality public education for all.
WHO am I BECOMING?

I am a becoming a person who stands firms on her beliefs and will fight for her child. I am becoming a person who is willing to take risk and be judged by others and still continue to fight for what I believe is right. I will not let the opinions of others silence me. I am becoming a person who not only identifies improvement and injustices but seeks out solutions. I not only fight for my child, I also fight for children. I am becoming a person who has learned to step back and look at the bigger picture, not just the moment but also the future and the past.

This research and the participants in my study have broadened my vision for the future. I have since realized that even if neither my children nor I are not around to witness the change, the fight is still worth fighting—for the sake of future generations. As one of my study’s participants said, the fight for the improvement of our school is a long fight, one that might last beyond my lifetime.

Who am I becoming? My research strongly suggests that participants’ family and environment had a great influence on their becoming activists. I am becoming a person who thinks about the kind of environment needed for my children to grow and become agents of change.
Footnotes

1. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) state, “there are many critical theories, not just one and the critical tradition is always changing” (p. 281). The term critical theory (in lowercase) refers to the many theories that use social, cultural analysis to critique, explain and interpret marginalization, domination, e.g., feminist theories, critical race theory, critical Latina theory.

2. The school district is divided into five regions.
REFERENCES


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