

Making Changes that Stay Made: School Reform and Community Involvement ¹

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This article argues that school reform initiatives - particularly those aiming at high schools -- have greater chances of staying made when the community actively participates as an empowered change agent. This historical analysis of the Mexican American parent community involvement in the Salinas high school district, in California, provides the context for answering some of the questions around the roles a community plays as an external force for school renewal, and the lasting effects of such protagonism. This agency, the paper argues, is important because of the centrality given to public education as sustenance of local control and of democratic political discourses, particularly when a community has traditionally been defined in deficit terms by those in power.

Key Words: School reform, advocacy, community, Latino Education.

“Until people learn it and demand its application, the law is just a piece of paper.”

Luis Aragón, Attorney

Introduction

Attorney Aragón clearly remembered the festive mood that pervaded the courtroom the day when the decision in favor of the plaintiffs was handed down. This was the culminating act of a four-year arduous litigation between the Mexican American community and the school district – a consent decree. After fruitless efforts x the community sued the Salinas Union High School District in November of 1975, on the grounds that children had a right to equal educational opportunity regardless of English language competence.

This article argues that school reform initiatives have higher chances of becoming institutionalized when the community actively participates

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as an empowered change agent. The article discusses the role a community plays as an external force for school renewal, and the lasting effects of the community's protagonism. Agency on the part of a community is important because public education in a democratic society is supposed to be supported through local control and to be responsive to local democratic political discourses. It is also important because in this case, a local Mexican American community seized its democratic power in order to contest deficit beliefs and assumptions held by those in power about Mexican Americans.

The struggles and resolutions narrated in this paper go back several decades; but they offer an historical perspective to relevant contemporary issues of community involvement in schools. Very recently, for instance, in San José, California, a church-sponsored grass-roots organization called Parents Acting in Community Together (PACT), mounted political pressure over a period of about two years through massive community meetings at the school board and the superintendent's office, lobbying local politicians, developing an aggressive media outreach, and obtaining the support of the teachers' union. As a result of this pressure, in March of 2003 they persuaded the school board of the Alum Rock area, as well as the district's superintendent, to adopt a new policy creating small and autonomous schools. This policy was conceived as a bold response to the perennial low academic achievement of the school district's Latino student majority. In this case the grass-roots group did not pursue a legal action against the school district, nor disrupt classes through parent strikes; instead, they used the existing regime to change it from within. The approved policy calls for design teams composed of teachers and parents to imagine and plan for new small schools. Additionally, this policy opens the space for continued community involvement through the new, small, autonomous schools' governance, curriculum development, and school activities.

The Salinas story makes available key understandings which support an approach to community involvement in schools that focuses on the community's networking capacity to redress

inequities. This approach emphasizes the power of the community as a change agent, and critiques approaches that see it as a school's useful partner at best.

As the consent agreement stipulated, the school district committed to offering full bilingual education and language development, to recruiting a diverse teaching force, and to promoting consistent professional preparation for all teachers on language, culture, and teaching practices. Additionally, the agreement included a monitoring process whereby the school board and community representatives would meet every five years to examine the progress of the settlement. During these meetings they would revise the state of the legal document and adjust it to the changes taking place in the school system.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section briefly describes the methodology, and the second reviews the relevant literature. The third section narrates the case study, and the fourth summarizes the lessons that can be drawn for today's community and school reform politics.

Methodology

This article attempts to answer the following two questions: In what ways did the community become an external force for school reform? What, if any, were the lasting effects of this reform? As Mishler (1986), Goffman (1974) and Charmaz (1983) have argued, meanings are bounded by the specific circumstances of people's interactions, and truth emerges from what data offer from the ground. Thus, the study was approached with limited understanding as to the causes of the events researched and the social forces at play; there was no hypothesis to prove or disprove. While two central questions guided the study, the themes and issues surfaced directly from the data and the context. Furthermore, being a Latino educator facilitated my access to all the primary data sources, and the relations established during this period have made it possible for me to continue this study in a second phase dealing more with contemporary organizational issues than with history

Minkley and Rassool (1998) posit that a community's memory remains available over time

through the “accumulation of [the] leaders’ voices” (p. 92). In this sense, the study attempted to unearth the lived experience of those who played protagonist roles in the struggles in Salinas. The challenge of uncovering long past events was addressed by using the following data gathering methods:

1. Intensive semi-structured interviews conducted over a one-year period with those who played central roles in the events. The study started with two key participants who in turn helped to identify others, generating a social network of people who had been involved in the struggle in various ways. Locating some of the main players raised difficult challenges, given that the study was conducted when most of them had already retired from their jobs at the school district, public office, community activism, or the agencies they used to represent. A few of the protagonists had moved away from the area or the state; others had a hard time recalling particular events and were only able to do so when prompted with newspaper clips or other participants’ recollections; yet others could only provide limited information for reasons beyond the focus of this study.
2. Legal and administrative archives were examined from the school district, legal advocates, and personal documents of some of the leaders.
3. The most difficult task faced throughout the study was matching documented accounts from archival data to the memory of the actors. Triangulating memory accounts among participants was then used as strategy to assess and define the validity of the data. The triangulation of these data sources with secondhand sources, comparing the interviewees’ recollections to what multiple printed sources said (such as newsletters, local papers, school records, census data) helped to establish the validity of various assertions. Interviews were also conducted with various individuals who witnessed the incidents either as students, teachers, or administrators, but on the margins.

4. Finally, in order to understand the changes taking place during the late 1980s and the 1990s, a series of interviews were conducted with some of today’s teachers and students, both at the high schools as well as at the local community college, in addition to classrooms and school observations.

Literature Review

Community, Social Capital, and Agency

Defining what community means was key for this study. According to Willie (2000), social control, geographic location, socialization, and participation, constitute the four essential functions that characterize an effective community. These components, the author argues, need to be singly and simultaneously engaged by its members for a community to be able to address its concerns. Bonding among community members occurs as a result of relationship dynamics usually mediated by organizations and institutions (e.g. schools). As social glue, bonding allows individuals to build their interdependence and sense of control over issues, sources of data, and resources. Social control provides, Willie writes, a sense of purpose to a community that, in turn, helps a community to direct its efforts to solve issues and challenges (such as school choice) more successfully.

While location is key to a community, its actions might extend beyond its geographic location, and thus the definition of what geographic location means needs to be more flexible than referring to a clearly demarcated area. Indeed, a community’s actions are often articulated through complex social networks beyond residential borders. A community, therefore, can be imagined as a “metaphor for everyday experience” (Minkley and Rassool, 1998, p. 93), and as an assembled collective entity with a past and a present, acting somewhat together and articulating its purposes in numerous ways to define its future (Anderson, 1983).

Putnam (2000) extended the notion of individual social capital -- originally coined by social theorists such as Loury (1977), Bourdeau (1985), and Coleman (1988) -- to include communities as social networks. The author argues that civic participation (such as parental

involvement in schools) increases when a group of citizens hold tightly knit connections via formal institutions (e.g. little league associations, or school PTAs) or informal networks (for instance, school meetings, dancing clubs, supermarkets). Through a detailed study of civic life in the United States, Putnam portrays the rise and decline of community life, and links these fluctuations to the levels of social capital. In the author's view, a community's civic life increases when social capital is strong, and decreases when social capital is weak. Social capital, the author asserts, strengthens the interrelations among individuals and facilitates the exchange of services. He asserts that social capital "greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly; [w]here people are trusting and trustworthy, and where they are subject to repeated interactions with fellow citizens, everyday business and social transactions are less costly" (p. 288). Yet, social capital (whether it is individual or collective) renders its benefits only when translated into a transformative force, as the story here depicted illustrates.

Agency has been defined as a creative force and the ultimate source for the transformation of social structures. Both agency and structure are braided as an integral unit of the social experience (Fuller, 1998). Agency generates power, and communities create power organically; in other words, communities nurture their sense of possibilities via organized actions, they enrich a collective sense of can-do and self-support, which, down the line, strengthens their social networks. This level of organic power is defined as grass-root, or base communities, and is exemplified in the case of the historical Mesa Directiva in Salinas who represented and directed parents' collective actions, or PACT in San José. Such organizations might assume a formal expression by legalizing their existence, or might choose to remain informal, as a place where people meet and act together.

Municipalities, public housing, health services, community colleges, and schools are perhaps some of the main social institutions where these organizations exert their agency, mobilizing their social networks to force change. This organized agency can be detrimental to the

community's common interests when the use of the network's power isolates, censors, and limits access to those who don't belong (Portes, 1998). The story of the Mexican American community in this paper exemplifies the opposite, though – the potential impact of a well bonded community mobilized to redress inequities for the benefit of its children.

A key factor in a community's agency is the use of legal action as change strategy. Among community and poverty law advocates it has been a tradition to resort to the use of the courts to force changes in policy, allocation of resources, and redressing procedures. In their review of legal strategies and social change Cole (1992), and Cummings and Eagly (2001) concur that substituting a community's direct involvement by using legal action prevailed for many years among legal advocates and community organizers. This approach, they argue, invariably diminished a community's participation in solving its own problems, and over time limited the accumulation of knowledge and skill among its activists. Cole defined this as the "white hat" approach.

Ordoñez-Jasis and Jasis (2003) argue that most intermediary organizations approach communities using the "white hat" approach. Based on their study in Southern California, the authors argue for the need to shift from service to an empowerment approach. These intermediary organizations, they conclude, instead of resolving a community's issues should instead only facilitate processes by which a community takes ownership of the issues at hand and develops internal capacity to address them. This approach should sustain the work over the long haul regardless of the intermediary organization's presence.

Threshold theory

It has been argued that, since the inception of sociology as a science, the very issue of agency has remained at the center of sociologists' concerns (Fuller, 1998). Giving the scope of this paper, instead of reviewing the rather long literature on the topic, I focus on threshold theory, one of the approaches most in vogue among social scientists and epidemiologists, popularized by Gladwell (2000) as the "tipping point". It

takes a few individuals, the theory goes, to enact change: those who have information, those who connect people, and those who translate information to specific contexts to trigger change. Two factors are of great importance for change to happen: a) the content of the text (visual, oral, written) being used, and b) how easy it is to understand its meanings and associations. Moreover, the specificity of context (within which an innovation is tried out) plays a fundamental role for change to be embraced first by individuals, then groups and, eventually, large numbers of people. Threshold theory posits that innovations spread in ways usually careful, incremental, and yet “intuitively inconsistent with the intentions of the individuals who generate them” (Granovetter, 1978, p.1421).

Many similarities exist between the way social change happens, and the spread of disease. In epidemics, there is an initial place where the problem starts and a group of individuals who originate the spread of the disease. Locating the sources of a disease, identifying the agents who originated the spread of it, and pinpointing the ways the disease moved into larger groups, has allowed public health officials to contain and eventually reverse epidemics. Reforming schools follows a similar path. Contrary to the notion that schools only reproduce the status quo, they can be viewed as carriers of social change, for schools have the potential to perform a key role as focal points in the spread of new things and ideas. They indeed are magnets for people to congregate and where contagion easily takes off. Schools are, in other words, communities themselves where individuals meet regardless of intent. In this sense as physical spaces schools are ready-made vectors to disseminate, or to stall, innovations. They convene people to meet primarily for supporting the institution’s educational mission, as well as for countless purposes of civic life. As Noguera (1996) points out, “the education of children tends to have a centripetal effect on many communities, drawing together adults, who might otherwise have no reason or desire to interact with one another, in the pursuit of interests created largely by children” (p.2).

Approaches to Community and School Relations

Ample evidence exists on the positive impact that community involvement in schools has on children’s academic performance (Epstein, 1995; Valdez, 1996; National Center for Education Statistics, 1997; Ada, 2001). Likewise, research has shown the rich potential and complexities created by community involvement in schools (Bauch, 1994; Wright & Saks, 2000; Cunningham, 2002). Existing approaches to community involvement in schools can be classified into two kinds—constructivist and adversarial. People might use the two approaches simultaneously, or emphasize only one over the other at different junctures. While many differences exist as to intent and process, these approaches share a key feature—they unequivocally define the community as external and/or complementary to the school’s mission. In other words, these approaches assume that the articulation of the community’s dispersed resources and social capital with schools must serve the latter, in their quest for educating children, but keeping the community at arms’ length.

Constructivist Approaches

The constructivist approach considers the community a source of knowledge that educators need to access in order to understand the cultural, social, and linguistic barriers that separate schools from the communities they serve (Gonzalez, et. al., 1995). This knowledge is available at the household level. Teachers and parents can work collaboratively from this level to build meaningful curriculum, classroom practices, and school atmosphere (Bouillion & Gomez, 2001).

The household, in this view, possesses funds of knowledge (Moll, Velez-Ibanez, and Greeberg, 1990) that can be drawn on and integrated into the school’s own knowledge which, in turn, increases mutual understanding, and allows all voices to be inserted into the curriculum and the school’s life (Macwhinney, 1998). Constructivists consider a community the school’s natural extension since its students exhibit cultural traits that spring from within the community they come from. In this sense

educators strongly encourage the school's involvement in the community's social events as long as this involvement yields knowledge. They seek formalized relations to exchange services that range from parents serving in the PTA, site councils, and through school-parent contracts (Comer, Haynes, Joyner & Ben-Avie, 1996).

Some constructivists consider the community as a potential source of resources and services to be tapped. Thus, schools and communities establish an implicit social contract whereby the former commits to educate children, and the latter to give the resources (tangible and intangible) and services needed. In many cases the school building becomes a hub for a wide variety of services attracting parents and students alike, as a result of industry, business, and local and state government partnerships.

Schools' improvements (from physical plant to academic performance) can be seen when the school's relation with the community materializes through parents working at the site (e.g. Downing & Keaster, 1998;). The school - community relationship is, then, a two-way street: The community receives some service and in return the school benefits through more active parental involvement (Barth, 1990). Public engagement strategies (e.g. Resnick, 2000; Wright and Saks, 2000; Cunningham, 2002; Sokoloff, 2001), play a key role among educators who see the school as a center offering formal education and services ranging from health, job training, parenting, and community relations (e.g. the school as a facilitating place for groups to address conflict). From direct parental school involvement (Carter & Winecoff, 1998; Brener, Dittus, & Hayes, 2001), to establishing partnerships such as service learning (Davies, 2000; Sanders, 2001), the community becomes crucial to the school's life.

Adversarial Approaches

The adversarial approach places the blame for students' academic failure squarely on the community they come from, removing the locus of responsibility from schools (Sue and Padilla, 1986, Ogbu, 1994) and placing it onto the families. In this view, failure occurs when a community is either culturally deprived, genetically inferior-- a discredited argument recently res-

urrected by Herrnstein and Murray (1994) -- and/or imbued with beliefs and attitudes that differ from the school's (Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1995). Underlying this deficit view is a series of cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic factors that interact through the community's daily practices that, in the end, deprive children of full academic success (Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Harvard Facing History Project, 2002). The community, therefore, is perceived as harmful to and a source of problems for children rather than a support and complement to the school's efforts. The solution, in this view, lies in changing the school to accommodate the community's deficits so that over time the school can bring the community up to the cultural, linguistic, and social levels appropriate in mainstream society (see for instance McMahon, Browning, and Rose-Colley. 2001)

The deficit label is indeed a proxy for disease, albeit of a social nature, that relegates a community so identified to remedies, as in a medical clinic. Such an approach informs many initiatives and programs designed as treatments against poverty, drug addiction, and other social maladies. And in the case of schools, children are subjected to "remedial" programs, and considered "at-risk".

Case Study

This section first locates the issues in the context of dramatic demographic changes, how these materialized in the life of Salinas high schools, and the community's agency to amend the problems. Second, it looks at the results of the community's struggles and their long-term implications for reformulating predominant discursive practices among school reformers, and advocacy practitioners interested in changing the quality of relations between communities and social institutions, such as schools.

1. Demographics, Violence, and Academic Failure

Over the last 30 years of the 20th century, Salinas, California, experienced extraordinary population growth, a shift in its ethnic composition, and extensive urban development, in ways very similar to other smaller cities around it as Donato (1997) profusely documented. According to the 1970 census the city had an

overall population of about 60,000 people, of whom more than one quarter were Mexican American. Of these, more than half were farm workers. In the 1990 census, of a total population of about 108,827, the Hispanic² category made up the numerical majority (50.0%). Within the Hispanic category, 97% migrated from Mexico, and the other 3% from the Caribbean, Central and South America. In other words, from 1970 to 1990 the Mexican American population more than doubled in Salinas. By the 2000 census the Hispanic category made up 53%, and European Americans 38% out of a total population of about 151,000.

These changes have been reflected more dramatically in the schools, as the particular case of Salinas Union High School District exemplifies. Here the total Hispanic and other non-white category increased a total of 43 percentage points in 30 years --from 29% in 1970, to 72% in 2000 (see tables one and two).

This new social composition appeared to be an insurmountable challenge in the 1970s when the first big wave of demographic change hit the classrooms. Teachers and school authorities could no longer ignore students' linguistic, social, and cultural needs. These challenges were compounded by a pedagogical and instructional experience steeped in the practices of the more homogeneous population of previous decades, one that no longer served the schools' new population. According to Arturo Estrada, at the time one of the main community leaders, school officials appeared unresponsive to any request the community brought to them. Issues as simple as how to file a complaint were ignored. Recalling the incident that triggered his own involvement in the school reform movement he said,

My daughter was having problems at school and one day I decided to go there and ask for her records. When I requested them at the main office, the administrator

said the records were private. So I talked to Luis Aragón at the CRLA³ office here in Salinas. He explained everything to me and he even gave me the legal argument on my rights to my daughter's CUM folder⁴ as student's records are called.

Mr. Estrada's experience typifies the value of networking and individual agency. The denial of his daughter's records prompted him to connect two things: one, his legal right to the records; and two, the enforcement of this right through his own networking capacity. He immediately sought legal counsel through an intermediary organization he knew through his labor disputes as an agricultural worker. For several years this organization had supported the struggles for safety in the workplace, salaries and benefits to agricultural workers who had joined César Chávez's unionizing efforts.

In other words, Mr. Estrada owned a social capital he now was justly willing to use to advance a right not directly linked to his labor experience. He exerted his agency to benefit his individual and family needs, which at this point were not necessarily connected to a larger community.

The following day I went back to the office and again I asked for my daughter's CUM folder and cited all the legal provisions that assisted me in my rights. This time, of course, the administrators let me read the records. According to the law, a teacher is not supposed to write personal comments about a student on the CUM folder. It really made me angry when I read a lot of personal and disrespectful comments about my child.

His voice breaking as he talked, he added, "talking to other parents, I realized my situation was not unique. That's what ignited my interest and

2 The 1990 census data includes under the 'Hispanic' category all persons of Mexican descent born in the United States, Mexican immigrants, as well as Central American, South American, and Caribbean descents born in or recently migrated to the United States.

3 California Rural Legal Assistance.

4 Cumulative folder (CUM folder) is the official form schools are required to keep for every student. Usually these folders follow a student from school to school. These folders contain the history of a student's academic life: Grades, language tests, course work, behavior, health, test scores. These folders are used as reference in elementary, middle and high schools.

later involvement in the struggle for school change.” In his view, the disrespect and dismissal he experienced seemed to be a common experience among parents, and his experience fed the nascent community organizing efforts he and others were planning around their children’s schooling.

Collignon, Men, and Tan, (2001) found strikingly similar patterns among South East Asians whose lack of knowledge of the education system aggravated their school situation; as in the case of Mexican American children, South East Asians encountered among school staff very low academic expectations and avoidance of their language and cultural needs at best. It took individual parents’ indignation to find out how the system works, and what rights assisted them. In the case of the Mexican American community in Salinas, issues of race and social class appeared deeply entangled. Interestingly enough, in his study of the Mexican American community of Brownsville, California, Donato (1997) also found the same pattern of behavior among school staff that systematically dismissed the community’s demands.

Violence became increasingly serious throughout the high schools. During the late 1970s fist-fights involving sometimes up to 200 high schoolers spilled over onto the streets of the city. Stopping these incidents became a central concern for school administrators who added extra hall supervision and expedited suspension and expulsion procedures, thus suggesting that conflicts had merely behavioral causes. The community leadership argued, instead, that those events were tied to scheduling, curriculum and instruction rather than to simply behavioral problems. “Students got out of their overcrowded classrooms using any excuse at any time they wanted,” Ms. Padilla stated recalling her son’s experience. This unruly behavior, of course, “increased the chances of confrontation because of the intense hall traffic. Student behavior reflected the pressure of cramped quarters.” Ms. Soliz, a student at the time, stated: “You could easily see 300 to 400 students roaming the halls at Encino High at any given time during the day.” This situation did not change at Encino High until the mid 1990s, when teachers launched a whole-school

reform effort adopting, among other measures, a block schedule (Olsen, Jaramillo, McCall, & White, 1999).

Most Mexican American students followed their parents to a life in the fields, and schools had a direct responsibility for this tracking. Between the years of 1970 and 1983 about half of these youngsters were pushed out of the high school district each year. Of the graduating students, the majority went straight to work, and very few went on to the local community college. Some Mexican American parents, like Mr. Ramos, resented this process of elimination and selection, and considered it unjust treatment to their children. “At times you would think Encino High school was nothing but a referral agency for the military and the fields,” asserted Mr. Ramos, a parent leader whose son attended this school.

Children with no English language competence were given English textbooks and tested in all subjects in the English language. As a result, they failed, and showed very slow academic progress over time. In 1975, for instance, Mexican Americans made up 27.7% of the total student population in the district, but they comprised 44% of all students labeled “mentally retarded” and thus assigned to special education classes. This disproportionate classification remained practically unchanged well into the 1980s.

“When I’d see a new kid at my door I’d just tell him, ‘your fly is down’. If he looked down, I then knew he spoke English,” said Mr. Schmidt, an English language teacher describing his language competence evaluation methods. His assessment was typical of the school’s approaches to language development needs in the 1970s. According to the district’s scheduling and catalog records, before the consent agreement adopted in 1979, most high schools in Salinas offered from three to four classes in English as a Second Language, where teachers taught English language grammar with little or no connection to the content of school work as well as no coherent sequential progress. This system prevented Mexican-American students from taking the more demanding college-bound curriculum.

The tracking and almost total lack of support that English language learners faced was compounded by social isolation. Ms. Soliz, who migrated to California from Mexico when she was 12 years of age, found herself and her Spanish-speaking friends excluded from typical high school activities such as sports, band, school newspaper, contests, and the cheerleaders' club. Students tended to group along the lines of language, residence, and ethnic group. "European American students hung out on one side, U.S. born Mexican Americans on another; and Mexican immigrants, yet on another, separate side," Ms. Soliz described her old high school's yard.

2. Community Action

"In dealing with institutional power you cannot just go as an individual but as a member of your organized community."
(Mr. Estrada, Community Organizer)

As part of the lawsuit⁵ the community raised the issue of representation among the schools' staff, and the need to urgently implement affirmative action. The lawsuit argued that for every 100 teaching positions only 4 Mexican-Americans had a job as teachers, and zero as principals. Community activists sought a proportional number of Mexican American teachers to the student population in the school district, as a way to encourage positive role models. The board of education responded with the creation of a task force to study the situation. The task force, along with the Salinas Chamber of Commerce, recommended hiring women and ethnic minorities at a level of 50 for every 100 vacancies until "parity with the student population is reached," as their proposal to the board of education stated. But the Board rejected these recommendations.

5 In a 1973 report distributed simultaneously in Los Angeles and San Antonio, Texas, the US Civil Rights Commission (OCR) charged that in five southwest states Mexican-American children were discriminated against. The study revealed that Mexican American students "far too often find themselves retained in grade, placed in low-ability groupings or designed for educable mentally retarded classes." (p. 1) The report asserted that much of the bias was "related to the scar of Mexican American teachers and administrators." (p.2)

The Board instead adopted a policy of hiring 30 women and ethnic minority teachers every year for the jobs available in the district. Yet, it was not until the consent agreement that the issue of parity came to fruition. By 2003, the district has hired not only the Superintendent, but also the majority of district-level leadership and principals, from the Mexican American community.

Dissatisfied with the slow and at times disappointing progress, parents sought the need to organize the swelling discontent into a grassroots organization they called "La Mesa Directiva,"⁶ (hereafter "Mesa") an unincorporated community organization of about 300 active members. Consensus and total involvement of its members in every action were the norms. The central purpose of Mesa was to coordinate and direct the community's actions to change the high schools. The Mesa involvement in schools consisted of a wide variety of tactics deployed during two distinctive phases: a conciliatory, and a confrontational.

a) Conciliatory Phase

During this phase, Mesa activists lobbied the board of education on specific policy changes. They wrote petitions requesting changes in curriculum, discipline policy, bilingual education, and better accountability systems for students and teachers. Additionally, parents volunteered to monitor halls and convened meetings with school administrators. They became ubiquitous throughout the whole district.

Simultaneously to helping schools in large numbers, parents sent petitions to the school board to modify or create new policy, but with little success. Mesa activists realized they needed to escalate the pressure using Alinsky's tactics, popular among labor organizers in the area. Parents' proactive strategy was now accompanied by their massive presence at every board or school meeting, counting at times up to three to four hundred. They carried signs, chanted slogans, and shouted each petition from the floor at board meetings.

6 The Leading Board

Nevertheless, the Board of Education and the school district leadership kept ignoring the community's requests, and the few changes introduced barely addressed the community's key concerns. This response pushed Mesa activists to rethink their approach and search for more effective ways to make themselves heard. They knew the school district needed student attendance for financial purposes. If no students attended school, they reasoned, the district could not have the numbers required for state funding, potentially destabilizing the district's budget. So in 1974, Mexican-American students with the support from their parents decided to stage their first school walkout.

The strike's main goal was to force the School Board to listen and answer positively to the community's complaints and proposals. The first day of the parents' strike, no Mexican-American student showed up at school. The following days parents decided to indefinitely continue the strike, pressing the school district through the local media, while building public sympathy for their plight. School officials threatened parents with legal action and jail. Mesa activists then decided to stagger their action by sending only half of their children on alternating days. It was assumed that this tactic would appease the school authorities while continuing the pressure. Eventually the strike dwindled down and ended once Mesa members decided to sue the school district.

b) Confrontational Phase

The parents' strike marked the transition from a conciliatory mode to a confrontational one. In spite of pressing the Board and school administrators with continuous actions and even a strike, students experienced no substantial changes at their schools. The lawsuit marked the end of a conciliatory era that combined active mobilization using the school district's own mechanisms, as well as sheer pressure from massive attendance to both the Board's and the schools' meetings, up to a parent strike.

Leaders of this movement insisted that they only resorted to a lawsuit after all other efforts had failed. Arturo Estrada summarized the community's feelings this way:

"We talked to administrators, sent them letters requesting changes, appealed to their leadership to deal with the issues, went to all the board of education meetings, and nothing. We spent many hours every day in all of Salinas' high schools helping in all possible ways. I worked full time, had all my eleven children, you know, and still I put many, many hours in meetings. They didn't take us seriously. They ignored us."

Attorney Aragón added his own testimony to Mr. Estrada's harrowing account. "This lawsuit happened because what we had in this school district was not just a conflict, but social stratification."

On the morning of October 31, 1975, a group of 10 families and the Mesa leadership filed a legal complaint against the Salinas Union High School District, at the US District Court in San José, California. The plaintiffs framed their claim as an issue of civil rights by grounding it on the 1974 *Lau vs. Nichols* decision that ruled for states and school districts receiving federal funds to provide language development programs for non-English speaking students, beyond merely equal access to education.

Attorneys argued that schools were blocking children's rights to equal educational opportunity. "We didn't want the law on paper, because until people learn it and demand its application the law is just a piece of paper," commented attorney Aragón.

c) Fallout and Long Term Effects

As soon as news about the lawsuit spread, however, Mexican American activists and their allies were subjected to threats, abuses and systematic harassment. Windows were broken in their homes and cars; they received death threats via phone calls day and night; some of the Mesa leaders were personally threatened, lost their jobs, and were blacklisted among some of the local employers. Mesa members focused on defending themselves from these actions and on the lawsuit proceedings. Throughout the four years the lawsuit lasted, very few meetings took place with the Board, and parental direct involvement at the school sites diminished considerably.

The 1979 consent agreement was reviewed and brought up to date in 1986, as required in the original document, establishing the basis for the district's bilingual education policies for the coming years. In 1989 the first report assessing the results of the consent agreement was issued; it offered the first clear picture of the changes implemented district-wide, ten years after the lawsuit. Indeed, from the day the agreement was reached, the district had embarked on a series of efforts to fully implement language development support to all high school students, which implicated the creation of an assistant superintendent for instructional services, an administrator for the bilingual education program and at least one bilingual counselor in each school. This new structure was in charge of establishing policy for the recruitment and preparation of bilingual/cross-cultural teachers, curriculum development, assessment procedures, and a system of professional growth for teachers.

The report found the district out of compliance on most articles of the consent agreement, yet the number of courses offered, bilingual teachers hired, and services provided to students in 1989 were a remarkable improvement in comparison to the state of the schools before 1979, when there was not even a procedure to evaluate and classify students according to their language needs. The struggles of the previous decade bore their first fruits in the late 1980s, but it was not until the 1990s that the historical legacy of the 1970s was fully felt.

By 1990, the high school district was graduating the largest numbers of Mexican-American students in its history, and sending them to four-year colleges, including some to ivy league colleges. "By then the schools had turned around completely," Dr. Greenleaf, a school principal during the tumultuous 1970s, acknowledged in an interview.

The struggles for equal educational opportunity galvanized community activism that, over time, was instrumental to changing elections from city-wide to district elections, thus allowing the election of the first council members from the Mexican American community, as well as to the Board of Education, and later even to the entire county.

In 1998 when California voted the infamous anti-bilingual Proposition 227 (also known as the Unz initiative), the Salinas community was shocked, but not too concerned. A provision of proposition 227 allows parents to waive their children's inclusion in English-only instruction and request bilingual education instead. This legal loop allowed many parents from elementary and secondary school districts to ask to have their children placed in bilingual programs. In the particular case of Salinas, this request has been so massive that school districts increasingly became, as a whole, "waived" districts.

More concretely, the Salinas Union High School District for instance, out of 6051 qualifying English Language Learners during the 2003-2004 school year, only ten did not request the waiver. This means that more than 99.999% of all ELL students' families requested the waiver. According to district leaders, this phenomenal support for keeping full primary language support is due in part to the existence of a solid network of parents linked to all and every high school in the district who meet regularly with school officials. Furthermore, the district created a network of parent outreach liaisons, as well as a series of formal structures that ensure parental participation in different decision making roles at the level of the school, the district, and the whole county.

Like many other school districts in California, the Salinas Union High School District continues to be challenged by internal factors such as a highly mobile student population, and more contextual issues such as shrinking funding sources, the enactment of restrictive educational legislation, standardization, and anti-immigrant hysteria. Yet the existence of a strong and empowered community suggests that the presence of channels through which these challenges can be discussed and, if not resolved, will ensure a healthy community involvement in the destiny of its local schools.

Conclusions

While the dramatic increase of the Mexican American community exerted a very important influence on the events, numbers in and of themselves do not explain how the social gears gained the necessary impulse to challenge and,

at the end, reform a well-established social order. Indignation and high social capital appear as two crucial forces behind the will of a community tired of being ignored and considered outsider by the educational establishment.

It seems that the confluence of a few individuals -- who understood both their rights and the school system's obligations, and shared common experiences in their relation with schools -- initiated the change process. Their efforts tipped when -- after failing to move the school district by simultaneously cooperating and pressing it through the existing formal avenues -- they tapped into their own children's potential and their power to interrupt public funding by walking out of the schools. Their networking capacity and the external advice from a non-governmental legal advocate galvanized this massive networked indignation, culminating in a successful lawsuit.

The space for dialogue between the community and the schools' power structure was considerably limited after the legal action was brought up, though. Neither the community nor the school district appealed to a negotiated solution once the lawsuit started. No changes took place from that point on through the four years of litigation in terms of substantial improvement of classroom experience and school climate. Clearly, once in the hands of the court, the community had limited control over the process and the outcomes; the community's efforts moved away from direct school engagement, focusing almost exclusively on the legal process. In other words, agency went to the attorneys -- which is what Cole (1992) identifies as the "white hat strategy." Sparring with the legal system requires specialized skills and legal knowledge from a handful of individuals, not mass actions. Once the lawsuit was filed, Mesa members had little to do since the court's struggle was a matter for the legal experts, a few plaintiffs, and the judge(s) in charge.

From the beginning to the end of the lawsuit there was no direct benefit to the children in schools, both in terms of academic outcomes as well as daily classroom experience. However, from 1979 to 1989, a period of implementation, creativity, and assessment of results ensued. During this time the school district created new

structures to implement the consent agreement, whose application fell in the hands of a newly hired cadre of professional educators. While community leaders participated in the first assessment, their involvement radically diminished and eroded further once the new structures were functioning. Similar to the agency shift from the streets to the courts, the community increasingly lost direct participation in the shaping of and sustaining the mandated changes throughout the school district. This time it was the educational experts who took over the legal mandate.

The district, nevertheless, over time was able to structure parental community involvement through committees in all of its schools, the district itself, and even the county. Over time these structures have enabled the community to actively participate in such important issues as keeping language development programs in spite of restrictive legislation (e.g. Proposition 227). As co-opted as these structures might be, their mere existence suggests that in 2003 the legacies of the 1970s struggles are quite alive, for the district leadership understands the importance of having community input on regular and organized basis.

While in the end the changes largely benefited the children of the Mexican American community, the changes themselves did not directly benefit Mesa activists. By the time the successful community action materialized in substance and form, these activists' children were no longer in school. One wonders why Mesa activists kept fighting, knowing no direct benefit would derive from their actions. The response to this question might be found in the nurturing function of their organic power. The continuous fight, even if it diminished while the court deliberated, could have corroded the community's impetus, especially that of its leaders. But it appears that the mutual support people lent to each other, the degree of tightness of their relationships, the community's massive presence in all events, and the hope that augmented with every small change the system conceded, provided enough fuel to keep them going. The resulting bonding, the degree of social control over their actions --from helping in the classroom, engaging the School Board,

the strike, and a lawsuit -- and the geographical proximity of Mesa activists, elevated their networking capacity and made them an effective community. This effective community, in turn, became a social force that transformed the structures of a well-established social order. Exerting agency upon structures and transforming them is what made Mesa's efforts transcend time and people.

This story of a community's transformative action is not only shared with readers to inspire them. It also raises two issues that deserve further scrutiny by school and community leaders:

1. School leaders must examine the serious shortcomings of the existing dual approach – the community as adversarial force and the community as a basis for resources. They need to reframe their approach by redefining communities as equal partners, and as social networks embodying profound transformative power from which both the schools and the community mutually benefit.
2. Community leaders ought to rethink the function of the law and mediation. The use of the community's agency to transform structures usually is achieved through agreed upon legal documents.

Reforming schools through the legal system might ensure binding agreements, but the legal system does not have a monopoly on this. Binding can be achieved via negotiated agreements between the parties and school districts, which avoids the grueling zero-sum nature of litigation. Negotiation can, additionally, set up further collaboration between the community and the schools. In this sense, knowing how the local power structure works, its main protagonists, and its norming principles might yield higher community involvement over the long haul.

Lastly, many advances in support of children's language development needs were reversed in the state of California after voters approved the anti-bilingual education initiative (Prop. 227). However, the pedagogical and teaching practices, and the systemic changes created in the Salinas Union High School District's structures constitute critical legacies to generations of children, beyond what the original community leaders dreamed when they launched their initial actions at the Board of Education meetings, or when they embarked on the lawsuit. It is in this unimaginable space of possibilities that organic power resides in every community, as a potential force to make changes that stay made.

Appendix

Population	1990	%	2000	%
European American	42,349	38.9	68,218	38
Hispanic	54,428	50.0	96,880	53
Black	3,024	2.8	4,943	2.7
Native Amer.	806	0.7	1,903	1
Asian	7,851	7.3	9,390	5
Other	319	0.3	407	0.3
Total	108,827	100 %	181,741	100 %
Census bureau reports				

Table 1: Salinas Population in absolute and relative numbers

School	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Pacific Islander	Filipino	Hispanic or Latino	African American	White (Not Hispanic)	Multiple or No Response	Total Enroll.
SALINAS UNION HIGH	52 (0.4 %)	261 (2.0 %)	64 (0.5 %)	583 (4.4 %)	9,616 (73.2 %)	321 (2.4 %)	2,214 (16.9 %)	27 (0.2 %)	13,138
CBEDS, 2001-02									
Table 2: Enrollment in California Public Schools By District and by Ethnic Group, 2001-02 SALINAS UNION HIGH									

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