What Matters: A Critical Analysis of How Parents in Low-performing, Low-income Schools Define School Quality Relative to School Performance Frameworks

Dissertation Proposal
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Background: Neoliberalism / HSAM / SPF / School Choice

- Neoliberalism / HSAM / SPF / School Choice
  - Neoliberal theories of meritocracy and the hand-of-the-market drive most contemporary school reform efforts (Dryness, 2011; Hastings, Van Welden, & Weinstein, 2007; Labaree, 2010; Patillo, 2015);
  - School quality is most often based solely on outcomes of high-stakes assessment measures (HSAM) (Enright, 2003; Hastings et al., 2007; Polikoff, et al., 2014);
  - These are reported, typically as the only data point, on mandated school performance frameworks (SPF) (Bauer, 2015; Polikoff, et al., 2014; Ravitch, 2009)
- The Use of SPF by Parents in Low-performing and Low-Income Schools
  - Parents at low-performing schools have the ostensible right to choose a better schools for their children, though few take advantage of that right (Enright, 2003, Patillo, 2015; Whitty 1997);
- The Use of SPF in the California CORE Waiver
  - CORE Waiver (covering 9 districts and more than 1,000,000 students) proposes new SPF with Academic Performance weighted at 60% of school rating, and Social-Emotional / Cultural Performance weighted at 40%) (Anonymous, 2013; Montes de Oca, 2015).

Rationale for the Study

- Lack of Empirical Data on how parents actually operate within the neoliberal marketplace of education reform;

- Pushing against the hegemony of "good sense" and the need for more liberatory policies (Gramsci, 1971; Lipman, 2004);

- Understanding the CORE Waiver SPF in the context and history of local OUSD reform efforts:

- Is the CORE SPF important information and will parents use it as a practical tool or it it mere window dressing on the facade of neoliberal reform (Whitty, 1997)?

Statement of the Problem

- Parents in low-performing schools have the right to choose better options, per NCLB and Race to the Top (Bush, 2001; Anonymous, 2011)

- Most SPF only share results from HSAM; the CORE Waiver SPF provides data on a variety of academic, social-emotional, and cultural topics (Montes de Oca, 2015);

- To what degree have parents internalized the rhetoric of neoliberal competition, selection, and meritocracy (Apple, 2000; Roberts, 2009; Torres, 2008)?

Research Question

How do parents of students enrolled in in low-performing, low-income schools perceive and define the quality of their children's schools based on the information sources that are available to them?

- Which factors contained in the CORE Waiver SPF, relative to each other and to other factors, are of greater importance to these parents?

- What factors that are of relevance to these parents are missing from the CORE Waiver SPF?

- What factors influence these parents' perceptions of their ability to choose schools for their children based on information presented in SPF?

Review of the Literature: The Pragmatics of Parental School-Choice Options

- A Review of Neoliberalism as a Theoretical Framework of HSAM and SPF
  - Meritocratic principles connect neoliberal economic theories (Harvey, 2005) with social Darwinism and and eugenic theory (Au, 2008b);
  - HSAM and the unproven assumption that they are the best measure of learning is linked to cultures of managerialism and scientific management (Au, 2008b; Pedroni, 2007);
  - HSAM and SPF as data sources are ostensibly meant to empower parents to understand variance in the qualities of different schools (Apple, 2006; Whitty, 1997);

- Do most parents have the ability to exercise their right to choose schools in the educational marketplace?
  - Districts abdicate their responsibility to make all schools high-quality (Labaree, 1997) by placing the burden of enforcing market principles on parents, who typically are not organized in coalitions to magnify the power of their positions (Dryness, 2011);
  - Pragmatically, most socioeconomically-disadvantaged parents of color do not have the ability to select new schools for their children given economic (and *de facto* racial) segregation in contemporary society (Patillo, 2015; Pedroni 2007);

Review of the Literature: Practical Analysis of the Impact of HSAM on Teaching & Learning

- HSAM have become the sole data-point in determining school quality in most contemporary school reforms (Amrein & Berliner, 2002b);

- Increased focus on local HSAM can be correlated with decreased performance on more rigorous national and international measure of student learning (e.g. ACT, NAEP) (Amrein & Berliner, 2002b);

- Most HSAM developed to ensure local validity, but cannot predict future student performance. "Drill and Kill" reform-driven curricula may actually impoverish the learning of at-risk students (Medina & Neill, 1988,1989);

- Most HSAM and related curricula are focused on the needs and goals of the dominant culture and are not responsive to the realities of most communities of color (Hilliard, 2000; Solorzano, 2008; Townsend 2002).

Review of the Literature: Theoretical Analyses of HSAM

- Critical race theory (CRT) and HSAM
  - HSAM have their genesis in a complex web of social and racial control efforts. Rather than measuring an "achievement gap", they more accurately portray an unpaid "educational debt" owed to generations of children of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2002);

- Social Reproduction theory and HSAM
  - HSAM are used as a method of gate-keeping and economic control to perpetuate inequitable capitalist structures (Au, 2008a; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Tyack, 1995)

- Pedagogic control and HSAM
  - Invisible pedagogies exist within the application and significance given to HSAM . The invisible, and faulty pedagogy operates on a presumption of equality, an elaborate and domain-specific code of discourse, as well as presumptions of home discourses mirroring school discourses, as well as the necessity of supportive, student-focused learning environments (Bernstein, 2000).

Review of the Literature: Neoliberalism as a Theoretical Framework for HSAM and SPF

- The historical roots of neoliberalism
  - Post-WWII economic movement in Europe, exemplified by privatization of previously state-run industries and services; focused on the benefit of the employer and owner over the benefit of the worker (George, 1999, Harvey, 2005);
  - Reached full realization during the Reagan '80's in the U.S, and the Thatcher administration in the U.K. (Harvey, 2005).
- Neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and educational policy
  - The rise of NGOs (e.g charter organizations, Teach for America) and near-monolithic philanthropies (e.g. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Philanthropy Roundtable) show how reform efforts are moved from governmental control towards private control (Apple, 2006; Pedroni, 2007)
  - Close correlation between neoliberal goals and religious neoconservatism ("Back to Basics") movements that reject current diversity for a more blissful, more uniform past (Au, 2008);
- Subaltern identity development as a response to neoliberal hegemony
  - Parents are not necessarily helpless subjects in this context; clear documentation of strategic manipulation of systems by savvy parents of color (Pattillo, 2015; Pedroni,

Methodology: Research Design & Rationale

- Critical ethnography of a single instrumental case (Creswell, 2012; Denscombe, 2014; Madison, 2011);

- "Critical ethnography requires that the researcher refuses the position of neutral observer in order to serve as an advocate to challenge situations that perpetuate the inequities experienced by oppressed and marginalized people." (Creswell, 2012);

- Time limitations and researcher convenience require a single instrumental case study (Denscombe, 2014)

Rationale for the research

- As Deputy Network Superintendent of Middle Schools in OUSD, I must be very aware of my position and how it affects / intersects with my researcher. As a scholar of socially just leadership, I must consider:

    - How can this opportunity to engage a parent in a dialogue about what he or she wants to see in his or her community school (Smoothe, n.d.) be leveraged to help drive lasting and effective reform at both the school and district levels?

    - How can this reform be about building the capacities of teachers and schools to respond to the real needs of the real children in their classrooms?

    - How can equity and social justice be served through a system that chooses to break with practices that have ignored vital data about the real, lived experiences in most urban public schools?

Methodology: Participant Selection / Setting

- Using data collected both by OUSD and the state ("District Summary: Oakland Unified," 2015), schools will be identified using two criteria:
  - The school must have more than 80% of its students receiving free or reduced-priced meals, a common indicator of the income level of its community;
  - The performance of the students at the school demonstrates a proficiency level in both Language Arts and Mathematics below a level of 30%, using the most recent set of standardized assessments.
  - The goal is to identify an elementary school serving grades Kindergarten through 5, or a middle school serving grade 6 through 8. These two types of schools have been selected because parents at both sets of schools must make a decision about where their children will go to school after they complete the last grade at the school.

- Selection of participant will be based on principal identification of a parent that has been involved with the school as a volunteer or otherwise self-identified as having expressed interest or concern in the day-to-day life of the school.

Methodology: Participant Engagement / Data Collection

- This method of identifying a specific case study follows Denscombe's (2014) proposal that the degree of how intrinsically interesting a participant may be can be used as a supplementary justification for the selection.

- Instruments for collecting data: Semi-structured interviews (Madison, 2011; Patton, 1990):

  - Behavior or experience questions that describe a person's actions;
  - Opinion or value questions that describe a person's beliefs or perspectives;
  - Feeling questions that get at a person's sentiments or emotions;
  - Knowledge questions that ask about the information held or believed by a person;
  - Sensory questions that get at the physical sensations experienced by a person in a situation;

Methodology: Methods of Analysis

- Critical discourse analysis based on theories of interactional sociolinguistics will provide the theoretical tools necessary to uncover the deeper meaning, biases, and belief systems of subjects (Gee, 2004; Henze & Arriaza, 2006; Schiffrin, 1994)

- Interactional sociolinguistics as a form of discourse analysis grounds individual characteristics of speech, such as making inferences or drawing conclusions, in a socially-constructed view of self (Schiffrin, 1994)

- The researcher needs to understand the cultures and belief systems of of his research participant. Case study and discourse analysis are the best qualitative methodologies for approaching this area of study, and interviews combined with observations are the appropriate methods for collecting the data will be required