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Re-imagining turnaround: families and communities leading educational justice

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to deepen the understanding of how minoritized families and communities contribute to equity-focused school change, not as individual consumers or beneficiaries, but as educational and community leaders working collectively to transform their schools.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative case study examines one poverty-impacted racially diverse high school in the US West and the changes that occurred over a seven-year period.

Findings – Minoritized families, community leaders and formal leaders leveraged conventional schooling structures – such as turnaround reforms, the International Baccalaureate program and the PTA – to disrupt the default institutional scripts of schools and drive equity-focused change for all students, particularly African-Americans from the neighborhood.

Research limitations/implications – Though one school, this case contributes insights about how families and communities can collaborate with systems actors to catalyze educational justice in gentrifying communities.

Practical implications – This study suggests strategies that families and communities used to reclaim school narratives, “infiltrate” conventional structures and reorient them toward equitable collaboration and educational justice.

Social implications – This study contributes to a body of critical scholarship on “turnaround” reform efforts in urban secondary schools and suggests ways to reshape decision making, leadership, parent engagement and student intervention to build collective agency.

Originality/value – This research raises provocative questions about the extent to which families and communities can use conventional structures and policies to pursue educational justice in the US public education. Learning from such efforts highlights strategies and practices that might begin to help us construct more decolonizing theories of change.

Keywords Parents, Educational administration, Educational institutions, Decision making, Community relations, Equity theory

Paper type Research paper

Amid uncertainties in the current educational policy environment and a polarized national sociopolitical context, long-standing racial and other inequities in education have increasingly come to the fore in educational improvement and reform policy and research (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006). So-called “turnaround” reforms, catalyzed by federal education policy during the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, incentivize rapid organizational change instigated by major turnover in leadership as well as teaching staff and assessed solely by achievement test score outcomes (Sun *et al.*, 2017). Such reforms continue to hold sway as an enticing theory of change, though the enthusiasm for such reforms belies a decidedly thin empirical basis (Herman *et al.*, 2008; Mathis, 2009; Trujillo and Renée, 2015).

An emerging body of critical scholarship on whole-school reform has begun to highlight how top-down decision-making processes by policymakers and systems leaders largely result in disproportionate impacts on low-income minoritized communities, especially school closures (Briscoe and Khalifa, 2015; Khalifa *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, in the policy context of

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neoliberal educational reforms, “turnarounds” and the school improvement efforts spurred by them often relegate young people, their families and their communities of color to the margins of decision making, which can exacerbate rather than ameliorate racial inequities in education (Trujillo and Renée, 2015). Yet organized youth, parent and community leadership have mobilized powerful resistance in response to school closures triggered by “turnaround” reforms (Kirshner and Jefferson, 2015). Despite the disproportionate closures of schools serving black and Latino students, efforts such as the well-publicized hunger strike in Chicago and grassroots organizing efforts in Detroit have successfully prevented the closure of some schools (Welton and Freelon, 2018). Such efforts have joined an emergent national movement that unites efforts to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline with advocacy for public schools that truly serve all students (Warren, 2014).

A growing body of work illuminates minoritized family and community leaders as drivers of sustained, equitable school change (Bertrand and Rhodela, 2018; Ishimaru, 2014). Rather than passive supporters of educator-driven agendas or individual consumers who “choose” between constrained options, collective parent and community agency and leadership hold potential for re-imagining the urban secondary school “turnaround” toward collective action in improving schools (Shirley, 2009). Drawing on an equitable collaboration framework with racialized institutional scripts, this case study of one poverty-impacted racially diverse high school addresses the research question:

RQ1. How did minoritized family and community leaders leverage institutionalized schooling structures toward community-driven educational justice?

Faced with the threat of closure due to low enrollment and graduation rates, Rainier Beach High School[1] parents and alumni mobilized to save the only predominantly African-American school in the Seattle Public School district. The story echoes a familiar cascade of long-standing resource inequities, neighborhood disinvestment, white flight and decision-making resulting in the disenfranchisement of low-income African-American and other students of color in an urban secondary school. And yet, ten years later, the school’s student enrollment of 800 is on an upward trajectory, graduation rates have surpassed the district average and the school has stepped onto the national stage for its academic programs and their role in opening opportunities to African-American and other historically minoritized students from the neighborhood.

Although the daily reality of the school still entails complexity and struggle, a nuanced understanding of this “turnaround” offers insights into how minoritized families and communities can shape the political and normative dimensions of equity-focused change. This case study highlights how families and communities “infiltrated the system” to reimagine traditional structures – like turnaround reforms, advanced learning opportunities, PTAs, and student interventions – in ways that disrupted the typical narratives and expectations for interactions that accompany these structures. I conclude with implications for building decolonizing theories of change for community-determined educational justice in a shifting sociopolitical landscape.

Informing literature

Education reform and racial injustice

Turnaround strategies represent the latest iteration of decades of federal policy aimed at reforming the “lowest achieving” schools and the lagging test-based performance of a growing proportion of the US public school student population (Trujillo and Renée, 2015). Turnarounds are defined as the “quick dramatic improvement” of student achievement in chronically low-performing schools (Herman *et al.*, 2008). Although there are four specific intervention models delineated by federal policy (transformation, turnaround, restart and closure), the broad class of reforms catalyzed by School Improvement Grants (SIG), Race to the Top, and other NCLB whole-school reform policies shared similar assumptions and strategies.

These strategies include replacing school leaders and teaching staff, charter or state governance, the infusion of short-term resources for major organizational change, evaluations of teaching effectiveness based, at least in part, on student test scores and interventions to raise student achievement as defined by performance on standardized tests (Sun *et al.*, 2017). Such reforms do not explicitly seek to address racial disparities in schooling outcomes, but the lowest achieving schools are largely associated with low-income communities of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006), and these policies have been invoked as solutions to close the so-called “achievement gap.”

To be clear, racial inequities are deeply embedded in schooling processes and outcomes, but the current dominant discourses and policies focused narrowly on closing test score “gaps” between white and other racial groups tend to locate the problem in individual students – and by extension their schools, families, and communities – in ways that do little to account for the unjust historical and structural arrangements of which these disparities are but symptoms (Gutiérrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Because the term “equity” has been taken up in practice as a narrow aim of achieving test score outcomes that do not vary by race or other “subgroups” (Gutiérrez and Dixon-Román, 2010), I use educational justice to refer to community-determined educational aims and democratic schooling processes that ensure those mostly affected by inequities are key decision makers in shaping education as a public good (Warren, 2014; Labaree, 1997).

Although a thorough review of the history of schooling is beyond the scope of this paper, a discussion of racial injustice in education must explicitly acknowledge the founding of the USA on stolen lands and centuries of colonization, slavery and oppression. Formal schooling structures often served as a tool of colonization, from Native American boarding schools to African-American technical schools and separate-and-unequal schools for Mexican, Chinese and other communities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006). School leaders more often served as agents of colonization and assimilation than as equity champions. Despite desegregation, educational injustices live on in the current structures and processes of schooling, from income-based resource allocations to tracking inside schools and implicit bias between educators and students (Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Orfield and Frankenberg, 2014).

Conventional schooling structures – from the curriculum itself and the Parent–Teacher Association to school improvement reforms and decision-making structures – accompany a set of normative behaviors and interactions. For instance, Khalifa *et al.* (2014) found a technical-rational approach to decision making about closing an African-American school that was “bounded by a bureaucratic system that largely underst[ood] itself as rational, value neutral, interest free, objective, and reliant only on ‘hard facts’” (p. 150). Far from neutral, the rational-technical logic embedded in conventional schooling structures and processes obscures historical contexts and power while discounting non-dominant experiences and understandings to rationalize, perpetuate or exacerbate colonial hierarchies and racial inequities (Patel, 2016).

Consistent with a technical-rational approach, minoritized students, families and communities are often positioned as impacted stakeholders, not decision makers, in school change (Bertrand and Rodela, 2018; Kirshner and Jefferson, 2015). Yet, in their review of turnaround literature, Trujillo and Renée (2015) argue that centering democratic aims and community engagement in turnaround might result in sustained and authentic transformation. Thus, youth, parent and community organizing offer possibilities for enacting democratic schooling practices in school improvement.

Organized families and communities as educational leaders

Despite the relatively bleak history and structure of formal public schools and reforms in the USA, many communities and scholars still perceive public schools as a key site of

opportunity for redressing deeply entrenched injustices (Anyon, 2014; Oakes *et al.*, 2006; Warren, 2005). For organized youth and families, their public schools offer the possibility of transforming both the distribution of material resources and the dynamics of power between state-owned institutions and historically marginalized communities (Nygreen, 2017; Zavala, 2016). In an organizing context, sustained school change is a political process linked to collective efforts to ensure families' own well-being and that of their communities.

Youth and community organizing builds the capacity of “everyday” young people, parents and community members to advocate for themselves to influence decision makers in key institutions (Mediratta *et al.*, 2009; Warren *et al.*, 2011). In theory, the deep expertise from experiencing “unjust social arrangements” (Fine, 2010) serves as a potent resource for organized parents and community members to influence educational systems (Mediratta *et al.*, 2009). Community organizing approaches build relationships, leadership, power and capacities to enable young people, parents and communities to work collectively with each other and with schools to achieve change (Beckett *et al.*, 2013).

Colonizing structures in theories of change toward educational justice

Although community organizing approaches offer possibilities toward educational justice, such efforts exist in a “neoliberal policy context that is the terrain on which organizing work is carried out,” (Nygreen, 2017, p. 42). Inherent contradictions and dilemmas arise from working within that context. Indigenous scholars and others who draw from decolonizing frameworks (Patel, 2016; Tuck and Yang, 2012) critique the idealized structure of democratic decision making as an unquestioned justice-based process and outcome. They raise a critical challenge regarding theories of change relative to schools that rely on tools from the conventional paradigm of school improvement policy. Patel (2016) argues that “the maintained belief that a colonial society’s structures can provide the infrastructure within which noncontingent emancipation can take place is, therefore, a colonizing theory of change” (p. 118). In other words, colonizing logics are so deeply embedded in the structures and processes of schools that even democratically-driven reform to implement educational policies may merely open access to a few and replicate injustices rather than transform systems.

Collectively, then, these bodies of work raise provocative questions about our theories of change in the US public education – Can families and communities use colonizing structures and policies to pursue educational justice? Efforts to do so offer insights about the possibilities for change rooted in local contexts that may aid in constructing more decolonizing theories of change. The next section offers a potential lens to attend to both the structures of schooling and the relations within and across them.

Conceptual framework: equitable collaborations and institutionalized scripts

This study draws on concepts from equitable collaborations, a framework from empirical work on district-organizing group relations (Ishimaru, 2017, 2014), merged with institutional scripts, from neoinstitutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 2012). Building from community organizing theory, equitable collaborations are inter-organizational relations that contrast with conventional “partnership” dynamics between low-income families of color and schools along four key dimensions: context; goals; roles; and strategies.

First, equitable collaborations attend to context by approaching educational change as a political process connected to historically-driven social, economic, racial and other issues in the broader community. Schools are often stages on which larger political dynamics in the community play out, so change efforts in equitable collaborations recognize and address broader relationships and issues beyond the school walls. Second, the goals of equitable collaborations focus on systemic change in schools and systems, rather than efforts to remediate or “fix” students, families or communities. Third, minoritized parents and families play proactive leadership roles that seek to balance power relations between

educators and families. Equitable collaborations designate families as fellow educational leaders and experts on their own children, cultures, communities, needs and interests. Finally, the framework distinguishes conventional school-centric, activity-focused strategies from efforts to build the relationships and capacity of educators and families to work together for systemic and community transformation. Collectively, these dimensions comprise a model that challenges the conventional “rules of engagement” between minoritized families, communities and schools.

Equitable collaboration is rare in practice; however, the concept of institutional scripts offers a useful lens for making sense of both the stability of dominant family–school power relations and structures and as well as possibilities for shifting them toward more equitable collaboration (Ishimaru and Takahashi, 2017). Within institutions, schooling processes and structures shape organizational activities through rules and regulations, values and norms and cultural interpretations that are shaped by the broader historical and societal context in which they arose and persist (Scott, 2014). These processes and behaviors become routine and attain a “rule-like” status. Institutional scripts constitute the taken-for-granted school norms and routines that define identities, shape actions associated with those identities, and even constrain possible alternative identities and actions that might be imagined within that institutional context (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 2012).

As elaborated elsewhere (Ishimaru and Takahashi, 2017), the institutional scripts about families of color in schools are racialized in consequential ways. Departures from white normative expectations of deference and passive school support behaviors are often interpreted by (white) educators as signs of poor or deficient parenting (Baqedano-López *et al.*, 2013; Valencia and Black, 2002). I build on this work to argue that the conventional structures of schooling – such as PTAs, decision making, turnaround reforms, academic programs and behavioral and academic interventions – are infused with racialized institutional scripts that shape the expectations and interactions between educators, students, families and communities. In the case of students, scholars who study the intersections of race, culture and learning highlight how the racialized identities made available to students in their learning environment have implications for their engagement and learning (Lee, 2001; Gutiérrez and Vossoughi, 2010). The schooling processes that foster particular identities are shaped by broader storylines in society – for example, about black males (Nasir *et al.*, 2012) – and become institutionalized in school structures and programs.

These racialized institutional scripts shape how reforms, structures and processes are understood and enacted in schools. In the case of structures like advanced learning programs, the scripts frame such opportunities as appropriate for wealthier, white students who are “motivated” and “highly capable,” as opposed to “black and brown students” often narrated as “at-risk” or “underperforming.” Racialized institutional scripts also shape how policymakers and school actors implement turnaround reforms, which seek to “fix” troubled schools serving predominantly low-income students of color as well as behavioral discipline or academic interventions, which aim to remediate individual students (Gutierrez and Vossoughi, 2010). However, these scripts are not inseparable from the structures they accompany. The shift from default structures and relations to more equitable schools and collaborations may necessitate disrupting racialized institutional scripts to foster new identities, interactions and relationships. In sum, then, this study brings the lenses of equitable collaboration and racialized institutional scripts together to examine how families and communities navigated – and disrupted – racialized scripts in leveraging dominant structures to transform their school.

Methods

Site

I purposively selected Rainier Beach High School to examine for this study as it represented an “outlier” case of successful turnaround that appeared to depart from the

disproportionate impacts on students, families and communities of color experienced elsewhere (Kirshner and Jefferson, 2015). Rainier Beach is a diverse, low-income high school in Seattle Public Schools, a mid-sized urban district in the Pacific Northwest, in the heart of an historic African-American community. The high school and the neighborhood continue to be home to many African-Americans, refugees and immigrants, though growing gentrification in the city has raised rents and property values and led to an influx of white residents in nearby areas. Constructed in the 1960s, the school enjoys a deep sense of connection with its alumni, many of whom stayed – or have returned – to the neighborhood to raise their own children. In 2017–2018, the student population was 97 percent students of color and over 76 percent eligible for free and reduced lunch, including 50 percent African-Americans, 27.3 percent Asians, 13.5 percent Hispanic/Latinos 13.5 percent, 0.3 percent American-Indians, 1.6 percent Pacific Islanders, 3 percent white and 4 percent two or more races. As discussed in the findings below, the school's enrollment dropped precipitously in 2008, triggering the threat of closure. Efforts to revitalize the school began around 2009, as communities sought to recover from the great recession and the federal government invested in incentive-based turnaround reforms.

Data

This qualitative case study drew primarily on ten interviews of predominantly African-American parent and community leaders, East African and African-American students and both black and white school and district administrators as well as informal communications with district leaders, observations, publicly available administrative data and documents analyses. Interviewees were identified through a snow-ball sampling method beginning with the core African-American parent leaders and asking them to recommend additional participants until reaching a degree of saturation of those actively involved from 2009 to 2016. Semi-structured interviews were 45 to 60 min long, using a protocol tailored to each role. I collected documents that referenced the school's improvement work, including the extensive chronicle of the school's improvement efforts in approximately 25 newspaper articles, radio stories and blogs, as well as school and district publications and grant applications.

Analyses

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and I wrote field notes for both interviews and observations. I first conducted a close reading of transcripts, field notes and documents to identify descriptive patterns and inductive codes that emerged from participants' words and concepts (Maxwell, 2005). I then coded the data using both inductive and deductive codes based on the conceptual framework, for instance, goals, roles, strategies and context. Examining coded excerpts, I began to construct a timeline and wrote analytic memos to reflect on emerging themes with regard to the structures and dimensions of changes, particularly a set of conventional school structures that emerged as levers of change (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Finally, I analyzed narratives about the goals, roles and strategies within those schooling structures relative to the conventional racialized institutional scripts associated with those structures. To enhance the trustworthiness of my claims and conclusions, I triangulated my data from multiple sources, considered and reported on discrepant data, and conducted "member checks" by sharing findings with key participants (Maxwell, 2005).

Findings

My findings suggest that a group of parent and community leaders working with educators throughout the system drove a transformation in the school that defied conventional

turnaround reforms, more typically focused on a heroic turnaround leader, basic skills remediation and test-based accountability. Despite using the conventional structures of parent involvement and school improvement, a “small but mighty” group of parent and community leaders disrupted the powerful racialized institutional scripts that typically accompany such reforms. I begin with an examination of how parent and community leaders undertook political messaging and media advocacy to address negative narratives about Rainier Beach High School embedded in the context of a politically contentious district and a gentrifying city. I then highlight how the goals of school improvement necessitated pushing back on the scripts about “black and brown” students by using an international curriculum to attract students back to the school while seeking to ensure access to high quality learning opportunities to the racially diverse students in the neighborhood. I then describe both the roles and strategies of parent and community leaders as change agents in the transformation of Rainier Beach High School as they disrupted the racialized institutional scripts associated with four conventional schooling structures: the PTA; turnaround reforms; parent outreach; and student interventions.

CONTEXT: changing the narrative of rainier beach high school

A deep sense of ownership and identification with the high school permeate the community of Rainier Beach. Even though parent leader Candice Brower moved into the neighborhood less than ten years ago, she still often introduces herself as “an honorary alumni” of Rainier Beach High School at community events. So deep-seated are the commitments to this school that this honorary title is the only way she feels she can accurately convey her commitments. Ask students, parents, teachers or community partners to describe the school, and they will unerringly use the word “family” in their description. As former principal Dudley Law explained:

It was like a family there [...] So even the families would huddle, like if there was an issue outside of the school, the families will come to the school, would circle up and huddle how – we’d put our brains around how to support the families and [...] the kids [...] And teachers and everyone will be involved. Because even if something happens on the weekend it always comes to the school [...]

In the next breath, members of the Rainier Beach “family” will highlight its diversity. “We have over 50 languages spoken by the student body,” boasted Jamal Dunbar, a community partner and resident. The US-born African-American “majority” represents half the students; the school’s demographics stretch the definition of “diverse,” with over 97 percent students of color including many immigrants and refugees.

Rainier Beach lies in a region of the city with a long history of both vibrant cultural roots and de facto segregation shaped by historical racial covenants that confined mostly African-American and Asian communities to the south. Jewish families also historically called Rainier Beach home, and Latino and East African communities have grown dramatically over the past decades. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, narratives of violence and decay seemed to define Rainier Beach. According to a local radio reporter, “no [city] neighborhood has seen more violent crime than Rainier Beach,” and “most people knew the school was a dead-end” (Stokes, 2015). By 2008, the school’s enrollment had dropped to just over 300, and a scant 60 students had indicated the school as their first choice, out of the 1,300 eligible students who lived in the school boundaries. The school’s reported 48 percent on-time graduation rate ranked it as one of the lowest performing school in the district and state (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008–2009).

When the superintendent proposed merging with another high school and closing Rainier Beach, alumni, parents and community members mobilized successfully to keep the school open, but they knew it was a temporary stay barring major change. A small group of parents and community leaders came together around 2009 with the understanding that

political will to invest in the school was vital. Without addressing the broader narrative about the school, the politics of the city would lead to further disinvestment. Parent leader Layla Townsend explained:

So there was a narrative out there that parents were scared [...] they didn't want to send them there because of the narrative that was out there [...]. The angle of [news media was such that] any time anything happened in the Rainier Beach neighborhood, they would show up at Rainier Beach High School and do their report [...] So we contacted our local newspapers, our local news outlets, said you got to stop this, you just got to stop, and we had to make them hear us loud and clear. I mean, things would happen at [other schools], I mean it could happen anywhere, but you keep coming back to Rainier Beach High School to film this.

In addition to “countering the negativity in the media,” the five or six mostly African-American parents also set out to reframe the negative narrative about the school in the Rainier Beach community itself. The institutional scripts about low-income African-American students and failing high schools had infused the public narratives about Rainier Beach High School amongst students and families in the neighborhood. “I would have cleaned sewers rather than come here,” reflected a student of his former perception of the school. The parents began by going to the basketball games and using half-time to re-narrate the story of the school back to the broader community. Candice Brower explained how their efforts expanded to reframing the data about Rainier Beach High School both within and beyond the school:

We began to counteract people's stories [...] We started to become very knowledgeable in our own data. Where we were able to say we're graduating more black kids to college than any other school district [...]. 47% of our black boys was going to college. That's bigger than any percentage in the state. We were able to begin to turn their language, that they were using against us, against them, and start putting recognition [...] Whether it was a Council meeting or a neighborhood meeting, or just a parent-teacher conference that they had heard something. We were just making sure that we were on the pulse of whatever was happening at Rainier Beach High School.

Thus, parents began to successfully push back on the negative reputation of the school, but they realized the school needed a unique academic identity to attract families back.

GOALS: a new academic identity for rainier beach

By November of 2010, the handful of parents had coalesced into the Rainier Beach PTA. They called together RBHS and local families in a key meeting to set priorities and identify a new academic program for the school. They presented a broad range of different programs, from a focus on the arts, to law, to technology, as well as an idea first offered by the district, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, a rigorous curriculum originally designed for the children of diplomats. “Parents wanted it all,” explained Candice. After the meeting, the International Baccalaureate began to emerge as a lever to raise the bar of academics and to enable the school to become known as much for its academics as its athletics.

Given IB's establishment in the white, middle class part of town and the gentrification impinging on the neighborhood, though, the parent leaders at first perceived the program as an advanced learning curriculum for affluent white students – a racialized institutional script associated with advanced learning structures. As district grant administrator Doug Ogle explained, “Parents at first were not particularly excited about that, particularly because they thought maybe it was a program just for white students, and that it was a ploy to bring more families from the area who are white who are not attending school to go there.” Parent leader Layla Townsend concurred, “Throughout all of this time though, gentrification is happening. Like, it's continuing to happen. So then there was thought that, ‘Yeah, we'll bring this IB program here, it won't be for the current Rainier Beach students there, it will be for the influx of those who are coming to gentrify the neighborhood.’”

When Ogle connected Beach parents with families and teachers from diverse IB schools across the country, they began to see the program differently. The parent leaders – who by now had connected with community leaders, like George Dunbar – insisted that the program be inclusive of all the students at the school. As Dunbar explained, they saw in IB “a strategy to not only elevate the academic ability of the current student population but the esteem of the neighborhood as well.” Collectively, parent and community leaders were explicit that they would not allow the IB to create a “school within a school” like those in neighboring schools, with tracked systems that “creamed the crop” at the expense of students of color, particularly African-American students.

Positioning IB as a lever for equity necessitated disrupting the institutional scripts about students of color that framed them as not “highly capable” of rigorous work. Parent leaders and school staff had to deal not only with the perception of those outside the school but also with RBHS students’ and families’ own conceptions of what Rainier Beach students were capable of doing. Parent Layla Townsend explained:

I was engaged in the community outreach piece of it because even with an oppressed people, it’s still hard to digest that you can do this, it’s somewhat different than what they’ve been doing, the IB portion of it. The academic rigor, the extra study time, to ensure them that the supports were there, that their student would be successful, because there were a number of families who were like, “Nope, this is not for my kid. No, we’re not interested in any of that. We’re not doing any of that, why are you bringing this here?”

Over time and through multiple efforts (described below), parents, community leaders and key teachers and administrators disrupted the scripts and positioned IB as the right program to help Rainier Beach students realize their potential. As community partner Jamal Dunbar described, the IB held a particular resonance for Rainier Beach High School because “it’s an international curriculum. We have a very international student body here [...] and people were trying to say, okay, what would work best for this particular population, right? And International Baccalaureate was what folks in the community and folks came up with as being the best for this school, based on [...] the internationality of this school.” From the beginning, then, parents, community members and teachers agreed that the goal of adopting the advanced learning program had to be to provide all students a rigorous curriculum and expectations. Teachers operationalized this by making it mandatory for all junior and seniors to take IB language and literature as their standard English class. More recently, the school has continued to transition all students to taking IB social studies classes as well.

Strategies and roles: “Infiltrating the system”

In equitable collaborations, parents and families take on roles as experts and fellow educational leaders who help set the agenda and focus strategies on relationship and capacity-building for joint systemic change work. In the case of Rainier Beach High School, parent and community leaders collaborated with educators and leaders to leverage four conventional schooling structures while disrupting institutional scripts about the roles and expectations that came with them: the PTA, turnaround reforms, parent outreach, and student interventions.

“Not Your Mother’s PTA”: using the PTA for relationships and political advocacy

In the institution of schools, the parent–teacher association is imbued with normative expectations of support and fundraising for the school’s agenda. At Rainier Beach High School, the PTA emerged as a small and tight-knit network of six to ten parent and community members, many of whom were themselves graduates, employees, or relatives of staff at the school, the majority of whom were African-American residents of the neighborhood. Notably,

though, not all of them were parents of children currently at the school, and their affiliation with the national Parent–Teacher Association was limited. Parent Layla Townsend described the striking contrast between the standing-room-only basketball game she had just left and the empty PTA meeting that marked her initial entrée to the Rainier Beach community. “That’s when [alarm] bells started ringing,” she recalled. Hearing PTA president Renee Gardner’s report about the declining enrollment and shrinking programs (due to decreased funding related to enrollment) further alarmed Layla and galvanized her and the handful of other parents at the meeting to action.

The PTA undertook relationship building as a central strategy. They reached out to other parents and reshaped the norms and scheduling of the PTA to better reach them:

For our PTA meetings, we change them so many times to try and engage different families because we recognize people work, and then there’s that language barrier and so we try to have meetings on Saturdays. We would have them after a game, we would try to have them in the intermissions of games [...] We would have them in the hallway, I mean wherever we could grab people, we would grab them.

Moreover, the small amount of funds they raised was used to cover membership fees to ensure anyone who wanted to could join. As a network of parents, they worked to support other families in paying their bills, finding places to live when they became homeless, and dealing with crises involving drugs, incarceration, and abuse. Finally, they built relationships with the broader community, including “honorary mayor” George Dunbar, head of the Rainier Beach Empowerment Committee and member of the local African-American church, as well as other long-time community activists and a new coalition of community-based organizations focused on the schools in the region.

In addition to shifting the broader narrative of the school in the media and in community stories, then, the parents engaged other parents in political advocacy for the school in the district, the neighborhood, the city and even eventually at the state legislature. Renee Gardner explained, “We had parents that had never been to a school board meeting, we had parents that had never voted, parents that had never wrote, never contacted an elected official. They were starting to do this, we were engaging them and it really takes all of that to make it that much easier.” This advocacy resulted, among other things, in a grant from the city’s Race and Social Justice Initiative and support from a state legislator that eventually led to a \$1m allocation for the school through the Urban School Turnaround Initiative to support the IB adoption and outreach.

Throughout these activities, the PTA parents explicitly refused the institutional scripts associated with the PTA with regard to their role as passive supporters and “cookie-bakers.” Candice Brower explained how their daily influence for and within the school related to the group’s motto, “Not Your Mother’s PTA,” particularly in response to challenges by formal authorities:

Rainier Beach PTA was brought up, and she [a former co-principal] says, “I don’t understand why they have to be involved in a day-to-day practice of the school. They should be going to make cookies to build money for the school [...] We don’t make cookies. We’re not here to fund raise for your school. We’re here to be transformative change agents for the school. We need you to deploy us to spaces that you can’t get to, like School Board meetings and the Superintendent [...] No, we don’t make cookies. We don’t make cookies [...] We infiltrate, that’s right.

Not incidentally, the PTA later advocated – successfully – for the removal of the co-principal.

SIG design team: using reform structures to enact collective leadership

By 2011, the state had designated Rainier Beach High School “persistently low achieving,” which made them eligible for the new federally-funded SIG. Once again, rumors of the

school's impending closure began to circulate. The district applied for the SIG grant with a proposal for "Transformation Modeling 2012," including removal of the principal and a large proportion of the staff, comprehensive instructional reform (including teacher collaboration time) and increased learning time and supports (such as an additional seventh period and community-based student supports). The proposal also included the creation of a SIG team to oversee the transformation of the school, a committee comprised not only of school administrators, teachers and parents from the PTA but also community leaders, such as George Dunbar, district grant manager Doug Ogle and eventually students. Although the school was not awarded the 2012 SIG grant, the district leveraged its own "segmentation" policy to follow the plan. The SIG team – or design team as some eventually referred to it – was a mandated structure of the turnaround reform that became an integral decision-making body for the school change.

As part of the turnaround reform, members of the SIG team agreed to the dismissal of a much-loved principal and the hiring of a new principal, Dudley Law, to oversee planning and implementation of the IB program. Although the new African-American principal was from out of state, Dudley's wife was a Rainier Beach alumnus whose family still lived in the area. He brought prior experience with IB, and impressed the team with his emphasis on relationships. IB Coordinator Craig Peterson was also hired around this time from Arizona and joined the design team. The design team played a major role in Dudley's socialization into the school and the neighborhood, and he perceived their regular meetings as a form of community accountability that he came to value. Dudley recalled stumbling over his assumptions about the role of parents in decision-making early in his principalship:

I remember they got on me [...] so my first year I hired, like 19, almost 20 teachers that summer, when I was hired right before school started it. And they [design team members] were like, "When you having these interviews? And um, how do we know that they are best?" And I'm saying, "Oh, I did a great process, I hired these teachers," and I said, "I know these - we screen the apps." And they pushed me and was like, "Well, that's what you think. We're the parents. Can we [...] have some input?" So it made me look at it differently. Like, oh, I guess that does make sense, right? So from there we tried to have as many parents as possible on interview committees and trying to get kids to be part of the process. And I think at one point we were like, at almost like 85 to 90 percent of our interviews had some type of parent participation.

Thus, parent and community leaders' role in school decision making as part of the design team disrupted the institutionalized scripts about parents, community members and students and enacted a form of collective leadership for the school. Dramatic turnover in staff can sometimes lead to disproportionate impacts on teachers of color, but the collective hiring process increased the number of staff of color from the community and, according to parent Candice Brower, actually "strengthened the staff and community relations." By the time the school was awarded both a Race-to-the-Top sub-award in 2013 and a SIG grant on their second application in 2014, the "turnaround reform" structure of the SIG team had already solidified its role.

IB community cafes: using parent outreach to build capacity and relationships

By 2013, the IB was officially approved, though ongoing outreach and capacity-building continued in the implementation. As newly-hired teachers worked to improve their instructional capacity and ability to teach the challenging IB curriculum, the Rainier Beach PTA reached out and built capacity amongst parents, students and even community members without children at the school through the IB Community Cafes. Like the earlier two efforts to "infiltrate" conventional schooling structures, the principal and parents eventually re-imagined the expectation that parents needed to come to the school to be involved and used their cafes to build relationships between families and teachers and push

back on their own assumptions about community engagement. Dudley laughed at their initial earnest efforts to engage families through means, such as letters home and multiple robo-calls:

You know how many families turned out? Maybe two. [Laughter]. That was [...] what we thought was the best. So we went back and we just had to rethink, what does community engagement look like, what is authentic community engagement? And then what we started doing was, we said - OK, let's do our IB community cafes in the actual community. And it was [...] maybe at the [...] Ethiopian restaurant, Rainier Beach Community Center or Urban Impact [a community partner]. We were at one of these locations for the first one and then we had, like 20 plus parents show, literally. And then it just started getting more and more. But then what we started doing was, once we learned that going to the community made the parents feel comfortable, [...] it was more authentic [...] So it was just [...] changing the model, instead of asking them to come to us, we[re] going to them.

Harambee: using student interventions to foster youth organizing and leadership

Finally, the use of student academic and behavioral interventions typically take the form of individual remediation, but Rainier Beach community partners commandeered the typical structure to instead organize and build youth leadership around social justice issues in their community. With the principal and SIG team, a local community partner decided to adopt the Freedom Schools, a summer and after-school enrichment model developed through the Children's Defense Fund and inspired by the African-American Freedom Schools in the South during the civil rights movement. Their regular routine included rousing chants called "Harambee" (Swahili for "Let's get together") that build community, recognition and student leadership in social justice issues. In 2015, the day of social action at the end of the summer culminated in a major action in which students described that they "did Harambee" and got the city and the district to provide transit cards for low-income students to get to school. In the fall of 2017, students demanded and won School Board commitments to renovate the school, which had long been promised but never delivered.

Rainier Beach staff and community partners, including staff of WA-BLOC (the organization responsible for Freedom Schools), also used conventional structures to foster youth leadership in the school's adoption of restorative justice practices to address issues of discipline, particularly racial disproportionalities in discipline. With resources from the Rainier Beach Action Coalition (RBAC) and the City of Seattle, the school hired a restorative justice coordinator and trained students to become leaders of restorative justice circles. Most recently, staff, community partners and students have begun to disrupt the institutional scripts about the roles of teachers and students by positioning students as trainers in providing professional development to their teachers focused on undoing institutional racism.

In the end, Candice Bower positioned parent and community leadership as key to equity-driven educational change in complex sociopolitical contexts:

We don't have to recreate this. We don't have to keep researching this. Literally what we need is to begin to deploy folks, savvy parents who are able to be chameleon and play the roles that it takes to do this work, and begin to infiltrate their systems. I think that if you have parents who take their power and own that power you could make that happen.

Discussion and conclusions

This study is a testament to the changes that can unfold when parents and communities drive priorities and action in school change efforts. Rainier Beach parent leaders shifted media portrayals to remediate the narratives of a failing school in the politics of the city and enacted a form of collective, community-based leadership that spanned multiple contexts. Increasing enrollments, graduation rates that exceed the district average, deep identification

and ownership of the school and a growing collection of state and national awards [2] all testify to the dramatic changes at the school.

To return to the question of whether minoritized families and communities can use “colonizing structures” toward educational justice, this study suggests that they can and did use conventional schooling structures to catalyze change and open high quality learning opportunities for students who previously did not have them. However, tensions and contradictions inevitably persist in these moves. For instance, we might ask to what extent such efforts either seek or begin to realize systemic transformation and, ultimately, “noncontingent emancipation” (Patel, 2016). Parent leaders continue to worry that fewer African-American students elect to take and graduate with the full IB diploma than their representation in the student population. Moreover, beyond the small group of African–American parent leaders at the core of the work, only a handful of other parents joined the effort as leaders; the PTA did not expand to become a substantially broader or more diverse group of families over time. So when many of the key leaders – including the principal and the original PTA members – moved onto other roles or contexts, diverse parent leadership at the school did not persist, a dynamic Candice narrates with regret. Thus, the study also raises questions about how to cultivate and sustain parent leadership beyond a core group of passionate leaders and systematize the activity that emerged in this process.

The district politics and displacement also raise questions about resources to sustain programs like IB in low-income schools. The district has promised no dedicated funding to ensure the IB – and the collaborative structures and practices that support it – can continue. Unlike schools elsewhere in the district, the resources required to sustain the program do not exist in the surrounding neighborhood. Miraftab (2004) argues that neoliberal democracy simultaneously employs processes of symbolic inclusion and material exclusion. In Rainier Beach, parents and community may succeed in achieving symbolic inclusion, but the resources needed for the program may constrain its sustainability, a form of material exclusion.

Finally, much of the turnaround and leadership literature continues to portray turnaround as the work of a heroic leader who single-handedly rescues a troubled school and sets it on a track to academic excellence (Duke and Jacobson, 2011). In light of my findings, future research that expands traditional notions of leadership to include family and community leadership alongside formal leaders may contribute key insights for re-imagining the journey of equitable school transformation.

Note

1. The school, neighborhood and district are identified at the request of school and district leaders; all individual names are pseudonyms
2. In 2016, Rainier Beach High School was named a Gold Schools of Opportunity awardee (<http://schoolsofopportunity.org/recipient-details/rainier-beach-high-school>)

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