

Reinforcing Deficit, Journeying Toward Equity: Cultural Brokering in Family Engagement Initiatives

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Families are key actors in efforts to improve student learning and outcomes, but conventional engagement efforts often disregard the cultural and social resources of nondominant families. Individuals who serve as cultural brokers play critical, though complex, roles bridging between schools and families. Using an equitable collaboration lens with boundary-spanning theory, this comparative case study examined how individuals enacted cultural brokering within three organizational contexts. Our findings suggest a pre-dominance of cultural brokering consistent with programmatic goals to socialize nondominant families into school-centric norms and agendas. However, formal leadership and boundary-spanning ambiguity enabled more collective, relational, or reciprocal cultural brokering. These dynamics suggest potential stepping stones and organizational conditions for moving toward more equitable forms of family-school collaboration and systemic transformation.

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Faced with persistent race-based and economic educational inequities and rapidly changing student populations, schools and districts increasingly seek to partner with parents, families, and the community to improve student learning (Sanders, 2009; Schutz, 2006). Decades of research and policy efforts have focused on parents as key levers for improving children's educational success, and parent and family involvement has been consistently associated with positive educational outcomes for children (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010; Epstein, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001;

Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2015). Beyond conventional parent involvement activities (e.g., checking homework, attending open houses, and parent-teacher meetings), studies of community-based education reform, informal learning, bicultural families, and culture and learning suggest that powerful, though largely untapped, forms of expertise exist in families' cultural and linguistic repertoires, lived experiences, social and economic "funds of knowledge," disciplinary understandings, social and cultural resources, community leadership, and ways of knowing (e.g., Bang et al., 2014; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Heath, 1983; Ishimaru, Barajas-López, & Bang, 2015; Lareau, 2003; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Valdés, 1996; Wang & Huguley, 2012; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Thus, families may be key partners for improving their own child's outcomes as well as creating greater equity in educational systems.

However, parents and families from nondominant communities often feel unwelcome, powerless, and marginalized in their children's schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

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By *nondominant*, we refer to communities such as low income, immigrant/refugee, and other communities of color, who have been marginalized by dominant institutions, policies, and practices (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). A body of critical engagement literature highlights schools as “subtractive” spaces—for bicultural students *and* their families—that dismiss and often mischaracterize the social and cultural resources of such families by using a deficit lens (A. Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Olivos, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). Racial, cultural, and other boundaries between schools and families can shape parent *disengagement* (Dyrness, 2011).

The literature suggests that individuals who serve as cultural brokers can play a critical role in bridging the racial, cultural, linguistic, and power divides between schools and nondominant parents and families (Jezewski, 1990; Lopez & Stack, 2001). These cultural brokers may create safe spaces to help families¹ “decode” the dominant school culture, educate parents about improving their child’s achievement, connect parents to institutional resources and knowledge, and advocate for changes to the institution (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). Although the notion of cultural brokerage implies a two-way exchange, efforts to help parents understand and navigate schools can default to assimilating them into the dominant cultural norms, expectations, and behaviors, thereby inadvertently reinscribing asymmetric power dynamics and constraining parent voice and leadership (Auerbach, 2008; C. W. Cooper, 2009). To realize the potential for leveraging the expertise of nondominant families in education, we need a better understanding of how those who “broker” familial and school cultural resources enact their work. We also need to understand how organizational and socio-political contexts shape efforts that focus on fostering parents as individual and collective agents in their children’s education.

Drawing on qualitative case studies of three parent and community engagement initiatives within a cross-sector collaborative initiative in the American West, we examined the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How did individuals charged with engaging families in education describe and enact their cultural brokering roles?

Research Question 2: What organizational and contextual factors enabled and constrained more collective, relational, and reciprocal cultural brokering approaches?

We first review literature on family engagement and cultural brokers and describe the conceptual framework that guided our study. We then provide information about our research design, the broader regional setting, participant selection, and data analytic strategies. Our findings suggest that people enacted cultural brokering roles that largely reflected dominant parent involvement approaches to socializing nondominant parents into school-centric norms, expectations, behaviors, and agendas. However, we also

found emergent parent engagement practices within each site that emphasized more collective, relational, or reciprocal cultural brokering approaches, which contrasted with individualistic, unilateral, or unidirectional strategies. Whereas more conventional cultural brokering aligned with broader organizational goals and policy aims, leadership support and boundary-spanning ambiguity appeared to enable cultural brokering approaches that departed from traditional remediation models. We suggest that the capacity and relationships fostered by these efforts, while insufficient on their own for transforming power asymmetries and educational systems, may be important stepping stones for building more equitable family-school relations. We argue for the need to move beyond examinations of cultural brokers as marginalized individuals enacting particular formal roles (e.g., parent liaisons, instructional aides, and teachers) toward efforts to understand how institutional contexts might facilitate cultural brokering work to foster equitable family-school collaboration.

From Parent Involvement to Family Engagement

Decades of research point to the critical role of parents in supporting student educational achievement (Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Amid 1960s compensatory education reforms, the notion of “parent involvement” became a strategy for remedying the causes of student underperformance, which were largely presumed to lie outside of schools. Such reforms aligned with school-based efforts to promote parent education and increase involvement, particularly of low-income families, through a deficit lens—one that relegated parents to deferent roles in school settings (Lareau & Horvat, 1999) and situated them as part of the problem of low achievement in need of remediation (Valdés, 1996; Yosso, 2005). Such approaches were primarily enacted through a set of structures and activities (e.g., Parent-Teacher Association [PTA] meetings, school open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and other events) that represent limited and constrained avenues for parent participation as passive listeners, clients, or fundraisers (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013).

More recently, the field has begun to recognize the importance of moving “beyond the bake sale” of traditional parent *involvement* models toward a discourse of family *engagement* (Warren et al., 2009). Family engagement expands on traditional parent involvement approaches by recognizing broader notions of family as well as a broader set of behaviors related to student learning and development both in and out of schools (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; López et al., 2001; Shirley, 1997). The 2014 U.S. Department of Education framework also emphasizes the need for moving beyond fixing parents to building the “dual capacity” of school staff and parents to develop effective partnerships in support of student achievement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Engagement approaches also focus less on discrete parent

involvement actions and more on how the environment of schools affects families amid racial, cultural, linguistic, and class inequities (Carreón et al., 2005; Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011). Such research emphasizes disregarding preconceived school-centric definitions of involvement and instead focusing on meaningful opportunities to engage families' priorities and knowledge in supporting their child's education (López et al., 2001; Olivos, 2006; Pushor, 2014).

Moreover, an emerging body of community-based education reform literature suggests that not only are parents and families critical stakeholders in educational transformation but also that they can provide much needed social and intellectual resources and collective political will and power to school improvement efforts (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Hong, 2011; Ishimaru, 2014; Warren, Mapp, & the Community Organizing and School Reform Project, 2011). However, efforts that move beyond passive support roles for parents are still emerging, and despite shifts away from deficit-based parent involvement discourses, the lived experience of many nondominant families continues to be shaped by disempowering school contexts (Barajas-López & Ishimaru, 2016; A. Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

The Promise and Limitations of Cultural Brokers in Family Engagement

Studies of bicultural family engagement highlight consequential, power-infused boundaries between home and school cultures, which are increasingly characterized by racial, ethnic, language, and class differences (Dyreness, 2011; Olivos, 2006). Beyond a simple gap of factual information, interactions between nondominant families and schools can surface cultural divides between different groups of parents and between parents and schools. The norms, expectations, ways of knowing, cultural resources, and forms of expertise associated with nondominant parents often have less currency and impact in schools than those typically associated with White, middle-class behaviors and practices (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Individuals who serve as cultural brokers can play a key role in linking, bridging, and mediating between school and family cultural practices, with the aim of promoting change or lessening conflict (Jezewski, 1990). Individuals or entire community-based organizations can also engage in cultural brokering work from outside of schools (Schneider, as cited in Lopez & Stack, 2001). Such work may involve helping families to decode, translate, and rehearse the dominant culture; providing access to or expanding institutionally based networks; and integrating and affirming the cultural values and resources of parents, families, and community members (Lopez & Stack, 2001).

One strand of cultural broker literature examines educators in different formal roles, such as teachers, administrators, counselors, or instructional

aides, who work to bridge gaps of information, networks, and cultural capital between families and schools (Auerbach, 2004; C. R. Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999; Goodwin, 2000; Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; K. C. Lewis, 2004; Sanders, 2008; Stairs, 1995; Weiss, 1994). Many districts create programs that help nondominant families adjust to the dominant language and culture, and they hire individuals from nondominant communities to provide bicultural support for these efforts (C. W. Cooper, 2009). In some instances, though, even those who share a cultural or linguistic background with families can reinforce negative perceptions of parents (K. C. Lewis, 2004).

Other scholars describe how the cultural brokering of educators can foster change on the part of schools and educational systems. For instance, Weiss (1994) described a context of “constructive marginality” in which cultural brokers used ambiguity, flexibility, and special knowledge to “reduce conflict and facilitate change” (p. 337). Similarly, Stairs (1995) found that Native teachers who shared a background with First Nations families sought to make the schools part of the community. Educational leaders can play a key role in promoting system-wide family engagement through efforts to cross boundaries between multiple cultures, build both educator and parent capacity, and cultivate the leadership of others (Cordeiro & Kolek, 1996). Yet, such efforts are often constrained by a “managed system” in which families have influence only within particular boundaries in specific domains (Hands, 2014).

As a growing number of districts have hired school-based parent liaisons, a nascent literature focusing on these roles has emphasized their promise for bridging cultural differences, helping families to navigate the educational system, supporting teacher outreach efforts, and contributing to schools’ efforts to become more inclusive of families (Guo, 2010; Sanders, 2008). However, some studies provide a less rosy view of these intermediaries. For example, schools might be leveraging cultural brokers to improve parent participation in traditional school-centric ways (C. R. Cooper et al., 1999), leaving intact limited understanding or cultural responsiveness on the part of the broader school staff and educators (Stairs, 1995). Similarly, a study by Martinez-Cosio and Iannacone (2007) of a single parent liaison in a school highlighted the tensions in her role as both an advocate for parents and a representative of the school and its agenda. These and other studies highlight the importance of attending to the broader organizational and sociopolitical dynamics of power, racism, and structural inequity that shape efforts to “broker” cultures in family engagement (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Dyrness, 2011).

Across roles, many studies of cultural brokers in schools use Stanton-Salazar’s (2011) conception of *institutional agents* to explain how individuals leverage their roles to open up access and help students or families marginalized by educational systems to succeed. Institutional agents occupy one

or more hierarchical positions of status in a school or society; possess a high degree of human, cultural, and social capital; and can directly or indirectly transmit institutional support (e.g., highly valued resources, opportunities, privileges, and services) to others (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The concept of institutional agency has been useful to illuminate how cultural brokers can build or amplify familial social and cultural capital in educational contexts. However, its limited application has privileged forms of interaction and resource, culture, or knowledge transmission *from* high-status individuals (in this case, family liaisons) in institutions *to* lower-status individuals (in this case, nondominant parents).

Taken together, these studies suggest the need to examine cultural brokering work across multiple formal roles and attend to the organizational contexts and systemic inequities that shape parent-school relations. An understanding of cultural brokering within such contexts can begin to distinguish approaches and organizational conditions that provide conditional access but reinforce existing power asymmetries from those with the potential for building more equitable and transformative collaboration between families and schools.

Contributions of This Study

This study seeks to contribute to the field in three key ways. First, it considers various formal roles and contexts (both district-based and community-based) to examine how individuals charged with engaging families describe and enact their cultural brokering roles to connect schools and families. Second, it analyzes how the broader set of policy aims and organizational conditions can shape cultural brokering practices. Cultural brokers, like parents, do not act in a vacuum but within a complex ecology of organizational and political conditions that enable and constrain their work. Finally, this study uses a framework of equitable collaboration in tandem with an organizational lens to examine how intermediaries can interact with nondominant parents to provide institutional knowledge, power, and resources *for* them (in ways that align with conventional parent involvement and potentially reinforce deficit framings of the problem) and work *with* parents to directly access and *change* the systems and power asymmetries that exacerbate educational and societal inequities.

Conceptual Framework

The study brings together a framework of equitable collaboration with boundary-spanning theory. Specifically, we use an equitable collaboration lens to examine how individuals in formally designated cultural brokering roles narrated and enacted their work with families. We use theory about boundary spanners to illuminate the contextual conditions that constrained

and enabled more innovative cultural brokering approaches in the context of conventional parent involvement policy goals.

Equitable Collaboration

Rooted in sociological theories, the equitable collaboration framework emerged from the research on community organizing for education reform (Warren et al., 2011), civic capacity initiatives (Stone, 2001), and district-community collaborations (Ishimaru, 2014). Equitable collaborations are characterized by four key dimensions: (a) goals of systemic change, (b) proactive leadership roles for nondominant parents that seek a degree of parity between educators and families, (c) strategies that emphasize relationships and capacity building, and (d) educational change as a political process connected to social issues in the broader community context. As to roles for parents and community members, the framework distinguishes efforts that treat parents as passive clients or beneficiaries from those that approach parents as experts on their own children, culture, communities, needs, and interests. Such approaches work to engage parents and families in decision making and in shaping the educational agenda as fellow educational leaders. The framework also distinguishes conventional school-centric, activity-focused *strategies* from efforts to build the relationships and capacity of educators and families to work productively together for systemic and community improvement.

As in Stanton-Salazar's (2011) institutional agent theory, Bourdieu's (1986) conceptions of social and cultural capital provide a theoretical foundation for the relationship-building and capacity-building *strategies* of equitable collaboration while also pointing to the need to attend to the *contexts* within which capital is activated and deployed. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital refers to social relations, networks, and access, while cultural capital refers to knowledge, experiences, values, beliefs, and cultural resources; these (and other) forms of capital structure and maintain inequality. According to this theory, the field—or the sociopolitical context within which these forms of capital are cultivated or deployed—is consequential for understanding the effectiveness of various capital in realizing desired ends. In the field of schools, the forms of social and cultural capital possessed by many low-income, immigrant, or other families of color often have less value than the dominant forms of capital that many White, middle-class families possess, resulting in better access to institutional resources and opportunities that preserve middle-class social and economic positions (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Thus, while capacity building (especially related to cultural capital) and relationships (as social capital) are key strategies in community organizing and collective engagement, the systemic transformation aim of equitable collaborations requires attention to the level of intervention, power, and directionality of such interactions as well as the broader context within which they unfold.

These three dimensions of equitable collaboration roles and strategies attend to distinctions between *individual* and *collective* forms of engagement (level of intervention), *relational* and *unilateral* dynamics (power), and *unidirectional* and *reciprocal* relationships (directionality). Like Stanton-Salazar (2011, p. 1066), we recognize that family-school relations unfold within inequitable contexts of sociopolitical stratification structured by race, class, and language. We use this conceptual framework to distinguish cultural brokering work that aims to “widen the pipeline” (improve access without challenging deficit framings or conventional parent involvement approaches) from potential forms of parent and family agency and power to “change the world” (transform family-school relations and educational systems).

First, an equitable collaboration lens suggests that nondominant parents and families can provide valuable forms of information and support to each other and that collective sharing of such assets can facilitate their participation and advocacy. Conventional parent engagement efforts often seek to increase individual parents’ capacity to support their own children, an approach that assumes parents’ only impact is on their own children. For example, a number of parent education programs aim to help parents prepare for one-on-one parent-teacher conferences. These programs also emphasize advocacy largely on behalf of one’s own child to ensure he or she receives the services or supports needed to ensure their success (see e.g., Chrispeels & González, 2006). Although individual parent advocacy and support behaviors are important, this predominantly individualistic focus can preclude more collective efforts to engage families together, which may be more culturally responsive for some nondominant communities (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Warren et al., 2009). A narrow focus on individual engagement may also reinforce dominant culture assumptions about a zero-sum game wherein advances for some individuals come at the expense of others, in contrast with a focus on education for all children as a public good (Labaree, 1997).

Second, the conception of equity that undergirds our framework implies a degree of parity in the relationships between parents, cultural brokers, and educators. Loomer’s (1976) distinction between *unilateral* power “over” and *relational* power “with” may be helpful for highlighting how more lateral or “bonding” social capital between parents can also provide access, information, and resources that can broaden learning opportunities for students (Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001). The relational power between parents, families, and community members engaged together can influence institutions to provide access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities and to change systemically in ways that require less dependence on institutional agents to serve as gatekeepers. An equitable collaboration perspective illuminates how such resources and power may already reside in both individuals and groups, thereby precluding the need to advocate *for* others or *give* power to individuals. Thus, building the *relational* power of parents and families around shared concerns can effect institutional change.

Finally, using an equitable collaboration lens suggests that cultural brokering can cultivate more *reciprocal* relationships and forms of support. Equitable collaboration posits that parents and families both possess and can build cultural and intellectual resources, “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992), and cultural practices and ways of knowing that can help instructional and institutional practices become more accessible, transparent, or responsive. For instance, in Bolivar and Chrispeels’s (2011) study, parents who participated in a parent leadership program drew on their intellectual and social capital to improve school safety, catalyze the creation of a midyear intersession educational program, organize a parent literacy program, create a parent computer center, and found organizations that worked to improve the educational system. Likewise, studies of community organizing like that of Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009) suggest that parent organizing efforts can improve relational trust between families and educators as well as school capacity, both of which are key resources for school change (Bryk et al., 2010). Thus, cultural brokers may also, in theory, identify and help leverage families’ existing resources, capacity, and culturally embedded knowledge to foster more *reciprocal* relations between schools and families.

Boundary Spanning in Bottom-Up Policy Implementation

Our conceptual framework applies the collective, relational, and reciprocal dynamics of equitable collaborations as a lens for understanding how individuals tasked with engaging families enact cultural brokering work. The second part of the conceptual framework focuses on the institutional conditions that influence how cultural brokering work unfolds. We draw on Lipsky’s (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy to examine how cultural brokering may be enacted either in congruence or at odds with broader family engagement policy aims and organizational priorities. As opposed to rational causal explanations about worker responses to awards and sanctions (i.e., top-down policy implementation), this theory suggests that the people involved (those at street level) make sense of the ideas behind policies and make decisions that align with their own understanding and priorities; in essence, the people at the street line of a bureaucratic organization, such as a school, implement policy from the bottom up (Knapp, 2002). This theory has been used in educational contexts to understand the work of K–12 elementary principals in engaging parents (Goldring, 1990), district administrators in small schools reform (Honig, 2006), and higher education policy implementation studies (Garces & Cogburn, 2015; Levin, 2007). Here we conceptualize the goal dimension of equitable collaborations as policy aims, in this case, at the district and regional initiative levels. That is, the goals of the family engagement initiatives—and of the regional initiative they were a part of—are forms of policy that people on the front lines of interaction with families and educators are charged with enacting.

Within this conception of street-level bureaucracy, *boundary-spanning* individuals in an organization are those designated to mediate between different organizations or spaces in order to implement the policy and its goals (Honig, 2006). Two aspects of boundary spanning are particularly pertinent to our study. First, boundary spanners have access to and exchange information between different organizations or communities, which often have different norms, (technical) languages, and collective values and beliefs (Tushman & Scanlon, 1981). Those charged with brokering family-school relations sit at the boundary between schools and families and thus may have better access to the knowledge, insights, and experiences of families than teachers or other educators who are positioned farther from the boundary. According to this theory, individuals in boundary-spanning roles use their knowledge to improve the implementation of the initiative goals or school performance. Second, boundary spanners in education often operate in a context of *means-ends ambiguity* (March, 1994). More specifically, boundary spanning in family engagement work unfolds within a changing context that often entails ambiguity about exactly how to engage families (the means) to get to the outcome (end) of improving student success. Although this can constrain the actions of cultural brokers (and other boundary spanners) to routine practices, the relative lack of centralized scrutiny and accountability mechanisms also allows cultural brokers some autonomy in how they do their work. This condition can create openings for practices that may depart from the dominant organizational and policy priorities, particularly where their values or interpretation of family needs and interests may be in tension with institutional norms (Garces & Cogburn, 2015; Robertson, 1995).

Methods

This research is part of a larger data collection effort focused on understanding district- and community-based efforts to build authentic parent engagement with schools and communities in a Western metropolitan region. We employed a qualitative comparative case study approach (Merriam, 2009) to examine the individuals in cultural broker roles in three initiatives.

Study Setting

We chose the three sites in our study for their leadership in family engagement in the region, as perceived by the leaders and key funder of a regional cross-sector collaborative initiative. All sites were part of the Pathways Project,² a regional “collective impact” initiative comprising education, community, and other organizational partners across seven districts that sought to double the number of students in the region to obtain a college degree or career credential by 2020. The project identified parent and community engagement as a key mechanism for attaining the common goal. Each of

the three sites in this study was selected to receive targeted funding and support to improve parent engagement with schools as part of the collective impact initiative. Although the initiatives within these sites differed in important ways, they shared a common regional context and key demographic characteristics. It is important to note that we did not select them as exemplars in the field at large; all had struggled to engage nondominant families and were working to build more effective parent engagement in education.

The communities in the region represent the growing national “suburbanization of poverty,” where “more Americans live below the poverty line in suburbs than the nation’s big cities” (Kneebone & Berube, 2013, p. 2). With more than 160 languages spoken in the region, residents represent diverse ethnicities, including large immigrant and refugee populations. Of the 116,000 students in the Pathways region in 2013, approximately 60% were students of color, 54% low income, and 17% English language learners. Regional achievement rates were among the lowest in the state. The three communities in which the study was set—Fairview (22,113 students; 23 elementary schools), Kellogg (27,500 students; 28 elementary schools), and Westfield (18,280 students; 18 elementary schools)—were located within a 20-mile radius of each other and had all experienced dramatic population growth, demographic changes, and shifting economies in the past few decades.

Participant Selection: Cultural Brokers

Through our case studies of the parent engagement initiatives, we identified people as cultural brokers because their formal roles entailed direct work to connect nondominant parents and families to the school. The structure and focus of each role, however, differed across the three initiatives studied, although all were working primarily within an elementary school context. We describe briefly the roles chosen as the focus for this study (actual titles): family liaisons in Fairview School District (FSD), facilitators in Kellogg School District’s Parents for Student Success (PSS) Program, and family allies in Westfield Center.

Fairview Family Liaisons

The cultural brokers we examined in FSD were the six school-based family liaisons who worked directly with elementary schools doing outreach to parents and providing support for teachers and staff working to engage parents in their schools. The liaisons—five Spanish-speaking Latinas and one African American woman—were predominantly full-time school staff overseen by the district office of family engagement, and they supported the delivery of the school’s parent involvement workshops, connected parents to resources, and worked to build welcoming school climates in the district’s elementary schools. They sought to prepare parents to become

more “informed, prepared and involved” as effective partners in helping their children to engage in learning and graduate prepared for college.

Parents for Student Success Facilitators

We selected the facilitators of the PSS program in the Kellogg School District (KSD) as cultural brokers. The facilitators taught a nine-week parent education program aimed at creating partnerships between parents, students, and educators to support and strengthen the learning environment students need to achieve high standards. Using a curriculum adapted from a well-established program, KSD piloted the program in two high-poverty, culturally diverse elementary schools in 2012–2013; at its end, more than a hundred parents had graduated. The district hired and trained parents and community members to facilitate 90-minute modules in the parents’ native languages for the English-speaking, Spanish, Somali, Ukrainian, and Russian families, with simultaneous translation in another classroom for other languages. The facilitators were parents, community members, and sometimes staff who worked in various roles in the schools and underwent training from the district to conduct the sessions.

Westfield Center Family Allies

We selected the family allies of Westfield Center to study as cultural brokers in a community-based organizational context. A partnership between Westfield Center and Hillsdale Public Schools, the Family Alliance Program placed family allies in schools—alongside part-time, school-based family liaisons—to connect parents to school- and community-based resources and provide services based on needs identified by parents. Westfield Center was a well-established community development association aimed at eradicating poverty in Westfield and ensuring that children in the community graduate from high school and earn a postsecondary credential that leads to a living-wage career. The lead partner in a place-based Promise neighborhood initiative, Westfield Center worked on multiple initiatives, including this effort to align and coordinate their family support work with Hillsdale Public Schools, the county housing authority, and a local social service agency.

Data

To yield a deep description of the work of cultural brokers in the three parent engagement initiatives, we collected multiple sources of data, including observations, interviews, documents, and reports (Merriam, 2009). We drew from 51 semi-structured interviews with school and district administrators, staff, parents, community leaders, six focus groups with parents and family liaisons/facilitators, and more than 110 hours of observation of all three initiatives’ parent engagement activities (see Table 1). All interviews

Table 1
Study Data Sources by Site

Sites	Interview and Focus Group Participants			
	Cultural Brokers (<i>n</i> = 15)	Parents/Families (<i>n</i> = 21)	School/District/CBO Staff (<i>n</i> = 36)	Observations (53)
Kellogg	6	6	17	20
Fairview	5	13	8	20
Westfield	4	2	11	13

Note. We also examined initiative-related documents from each site. CBO = community-based organization.

and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, and one Spanish-only parent focus group was facilitated and translated by a native-speaker research assistant. The interviews and focus groups aimed to comprehend how the cultural brokers understood and approached their work with parents, how they connected and supported parents, how staff and families perceived the role and work of the cultural brokers, and how their work was situated relative to their institutional and broader community contexts.

The observations included planning meetings, staff trainings, parent education workshops, and other family and community engagement events in schools, districts, and the community. As participant-observers, our research team members observed how cultural brokers interacted with staff, parents, and families; the roles they played at the various events; the articulation of the initiatives' broader goals; and the settings and context for the work. We wrote detailed field notes of our observations, and because we tried to have two or more observers at each activity, we collated the field notes across observers. Finally, we collected school- and community-based organizational documents (e.g., flyers, training manuals, event agendas) as supplementary data on the development and implementation of initiatives. Each pair of researchers also wrote periodic site updates to make sense of the data during collection and to share claims related to emerging understandings of the research questions with the research team.

Data Analyses

We conducted four levels of analysis in this study. First, we transcribed all the interviews and focus groups and coded them using broad concepts from the equitable collaboration framework (e.g., goals, roles, strategies, and context) as well as *in vivo* codes that emerged from participants, which we identified initially through site update memos (Guest & MacQueen, 2008). We triangulated these coded transcript excerpts with observation field notes, documents, and the site updates to construct holistic cases of each

parent engagement initiative and locate the broad role of cultural brokers within each initiative. Our second round of analyses included an examination of cultural brokers' work. We coded activities that cultural brokers used to engage parents, such as parenting activities, administration, professional development, advocacy, (student) learning support activities, cross-cultural interactions, policy/decision making, recruitment, information sharing, teaching, and fundraising. During the third phase of analysis, we applied the equitable collaboration framework to identify patterns in the strategies within and across sites; although there was consistency across sites regarding the more traditional approaches, we identified somewhat distinct dynamics within sites regarding approaches that departed from conventional efforts. Finally, we created a data display matrix for cross-case analysis to compare the organizational contexts that shaped cultural brokering work, with particular attention to the dynamics that appeared to foster more relational, collective, and reciprocal approaches, which are principles of the equitable collaboration framework. Together, these four levels of analyses provided us opportunities to understand the role of cultural brokers in each initiative, how cultural brokers enacted their roles, the organizational conditions that shaped cultural brokering practices, and which practices had potential for creating the conditions for equitable collaboration in systemic change.

As a research team who identify as people of color—Asian American, African American, and Latina—our own positionalities inevitably shaped our understandings and relationships, particularly with nondominant families and staff. By interrogating our claims and interpretations with a broader research team, we balanced the tension between validating the work and perspectives of cultural brokers while also recognizing the limitations and potential for reinforcing inequities. We also conducted member checks by sharing memos of our findings with key participants, corrected factual errors, and discussed with participants how we would address their feedback in our findings.

Findings

Our findings suggest that family engagement workers predominantly enacted cultural brokering roles and strategies in line with conventional efforts to socialize nondominant families into school-centric norms, expectations, and agendas. However, we also found a subset of instances of more collective, relational, or reciprocal approaches to cultural brokering. These strategies included creating welcoming climates, fostering parent-parent relationships, and embedding engagement in community contexts. We examined the organizational conditions to understand how these approaches could emerge amid mostly traditional cultural brokering and goals focused on families as supporters of school-based agendas and

expectations. More collective, reciprocal, or relational approaches to cultural brokering seemed to be associated with either formal leadership actions to shift hierarchical institutional arrangements or with family engagement workers' boundary-spanning positions in school organizations.

Understanding and Enacting Cultural Brokering Roles

Although the structure of cultural broker roles differed across the three sites, we found few major differences in the predominant approaches enacted through these roles. We first discuss the predominance of cultural brokering approaches that aligned with conventional, deficit-based parent involvement approaches. We then highlight exceptions to this finding and discuss emergent forms of collective, reciprocal, or relational cultural brokering.

Predominance of Conventional Cultural Brokering

Despite the language of “parent leadership” used by formal initiative leaders and an abundance of good intention, much cultural brokering work fostered individualistic, unidirectional, and unilateral dynamics that tended to socialize nondominant parents into dominant cultural norms and expectations in support of an agenda set without parents. First, cultural brokers tended to focus on improving how *individual* parents or families supported their own children. For instance, in one district's signature parent workshop, the family engagement worker informed parents about why they should be involved in their child's education and shared a list of 25 behaviors “to promote your child's success in school,” all of which were actions that individual parents should take with their own child, such as modeling a love of learning by attending the school's open house, having high expectations of your child, talking with them about their school lessons, and getting them to school on time. The community-based cultural brokers also had “caseloads” of families, with whom they primarily took an individualistic crisis management approach for referrals to social service, health care, and other basic needs providers. For instance, family allies described connecting parents with culturally or linguistically appropriate therapists, helping them access Department of Social and Health Services supports, getting food from the food bank, assisting them with paperwork or after-school care, and signing children up for a summer reading program at the nearby housing authority. Though such supports were undeniably important for families, most cultural brokers we studied interacted with individual parents to help them get supports for individual children rather than helping parents connect to each other or address students in an entire school or community. These individualistic interactions coincided with dominant school norms that parents should interact one-on-one with school personnel to get help rather than interacting collectively to change the school or address broader social issues.

Second, cultural brokering work reflected largely *unidirectional* approaches, which presumed that educators or other professionals held the sole expertise and knowledge, often based on normative assumptions about behaviors that supported the school's agenda. For instance, parent facilitators in one district taught parents a scripted curriculum that emphasized specific school-support behaviors, such as monitoring homework completion, checking report cards, getting their children to bed at a "reasonable" hour, creating a "school-like" home learning environment, and attending school events. Although cultural brokering implies mediating between different cultures in both directions, we found that individuals in these roles primarily transmitted dominant cultural norms and behavioral expectations from the school to parents from nondominant communities. Likewise, the community-based cultural brokers offered activities and field trips for students and their families to socialize them into particular dominant cultural institutions and domains. One family ally said:

So we went to the library and for those who didn't have a library card, we had them fill out applications. . . . And so they [families] were there to kind of know how to go to the library, how to . . . check out books, and . . . know how the library works. We got a tour for the all the families so that they felt more comfortable going in there by themselves. So they knew a little bit of where the bathrooms were, where certain books that their kids' reading level were at and then also the other sections of where different books and different languages were. (Family ally, August 26, 2013)

Across the sites, cultural brokers rarely, if ever, "brokered" opportunities for teachers or principals to learn *from* families to improve their instructional or professional practice.

Finally, the majority of cultural brokering we witnessed failed to address (and sometimes reinforced) *unilateral* and hierarchical power dynamics between parents and educators. For example, one effort to help parents "navigate" the system took the form of introducing a ladder of hierarchical school and district personnel who should be contacted for help in ensuring their own child's needs were met; this ladder implied a strict protocol of authority to which parents were taught to adhere. Similarly, a number of those in cultural brokering roles emphasized parents as menial support workers for teachers in ways that reinforced existing asymmetries of perceived expertise and capacity between parents and teachers. As one family liaison said, if parents were successfully engaged in schools:

teachers wouldn't have the overload that they have because they would have so many more people doing photocopies for them and cutting and pasting and all of that. And at the high school level, they would have so many more parents just chatting with the kids and feeling comfortable and supervising those doors or the parking

lot or anything, they would be exposed to anything that happens nowadays, [like] selling drugs at the high school outside the school doors. It's like . . . because [of] the lack of parents who are there, [that] is why this continues. (Family liaison, March 19, 2012)

That is, parents would come to school to conduct activities that support the educators and their agenda—in this case, making copies, cutting and pasting documents, and supervising spaces in a high school. Her final statement implied that the problems at the school were a result of parental absence, which reflects a sentiment we heard at other sites as well.

Emerging Approaches to Cultural Brokering for Equitable Collaboration

Taken at face value, these findings suggest little with the potential to transform power asymmetries or lead to systems change, but we did find approaches to cultural brokering that began to depart from dominant socialization approaches in key ways. Three approaches to cultural brokering work—which varied across sites—suggested more collective, reciprocal, or relational approaches: creating a welcoming climate, building relationships between parents, and situating engagement in broader community contexts. These approaches were widespread within a single site but notably, not prevalent across sites.

Creating a welcoming climate. Family liaisons in FSD enacted more collective and reciprocal cultural brokering by creating a welcoming, caring, and homelike school environment. With little exception, they emphasized building relationships with families, inviting them into the school, and helping them to understand and feel at ease in school and district settings. At the time, all the family liaisons were bilingual Spanish-English and were valued by families, in part, because they were seen not as representatives of the institution but as dedicated to supporting families:

[The family liaison]'s very welcoming. The ability to speak all languages I think is just, it's so important. . . . But definitely welcoming—I think welcoming and just that ability to kind of say, "Look, I'm not the district, I'm not the school faculty, but what my job is is here for you." So just that ability, and then . . . if you could be bilingual I think it'd be great. (Parent, April 25, 2013)

Another parent contrasted her experience at the school before a family liaison arrived with schools elsewhere in the district, alluding to a perception of racial discrimination related to the lack of welcome.

Parent 1: Before they pushed us aside/ignored us.

Parent 2: Yeah, when I used to come here I did not feel that I was welcomed, I did not feel that I was welcome in any school, I have visited the schools of

my older children and like always there has been discrimination towards Hispanics. (Parent focus group, June 5, 2013)

At quarterly district events for parents and the broader community, the family liaisons greeted parents with smiles and hugs and encouraged them to join in discussions and activities. In one school, the family liaison switched offices with the school principal to create a parent-focused space in the school where parents could congregate, build relationships, and work with the family liaison and each other on issues of interest. This focused attention and welcoming approach transformed the experience of the school climate for parents, particularly Latino parents who had felt unwelcome in the absence of family liaisons.

Family liaisons also built a more welcoming climate by helping to facilitate relationships and communication between parents and teachers and building a sense of trust between them:

Parent 1: It is very different [at other schools] I also have my children, there is no communication like here and . . . it is, how can I say it, like, very closed. There is no communication with parents or with teachers, like we have it here.

Parent 2: Yes, it is true because at least here you come and how can I say it, with *confianza*: there is trust here, we already know this place and other teachers help us more with the children. But thanks to [the family liaison] [others: "Yes, yes"] because we didn't have this before. (Parent focus group, June 5, 2013)

In sum, Fairview family liaisons enacted cultural brokering by creating a welcoming, homelike environment at the school and district (particularly but not exclusively for Spanish-speaking families) and facilitating relationships, communication, and trust between parents and educators.

Building relationships between parents. Although the PSS facilitators primarily imparted knowledge about academics and socialized parents into the dominant language and culture of schools, they also enacted more collective and relational cultural brokering by building powerful relationships and networks between parents who shared a language, culture, and experiences. The parents and community leaders in these cultural brokering roles stimulated new exchanges, understandings, and relationships between families that would not have developed otherwise. In addition, though, we found that through their cultural brokering for other parents and the relationships they fostered, the PSS facilitators themselves gained a sense of new agency and identity as emerging teachers and leaders in their communities.

Because PSS facilitators were themselves parents, family, and community members similar to those in the program and were seen as equals, they were able to facilitate bonding relationships between families:

I think what made the facilitator so special is that it wasn't the principal teaching it and it wasn't a teacher teaching it, it was just moms and grandmas and aunties teaching it. And they know how to teach because that's who's in the class. I thought that was what made it really special. (Parent focus group, May 16, 2013)

Across the language-specific classrooms—in English, Spanish, Russian, Somali, and translated simultaneously from English to Vietnamese, Punjabi, Kurdish, Burmese, or Arabic—parents appeared to develop supportive, culturally specific relationships with each other. As a result of the parent relationships facilitated by the cultural brokers in KSD, participants began to move beyond an individualistic information receiving mode toward a more collective, information exchanging space with other parents and community leaders.

As they fostered these relationships, the PSS facilitators described developing a new sense of confidence and self-efficacy as parents, many of whom originally shared their adult students' trepidation or legacy of negative experiences in schools:

I'm more confident to ask questions. [Now] I feel like I have an armor on me; before I felt like a soft shell. And a lot of it [before PSS] was more negative stuff of them [teachers] asking, "Well, what is it [the problem] exactly?" And just with me being in the program for nine weeks—and this is just a success story for me—my daughter's grades have [gone] from Fs to, like, Bs and Cs, like, literally within nine weeks. (PSS facilitator, May 6, 2013).

Although many of the PSS facilitators were informal community leaders before taking on the position with the district, their stature and identity as leaders grew as their relationships with other parents expanded. Though prevalent, this new leadership took various forms for different facilitators. For example, after recruiting and facilitating the workshops, one Somali father found that other Somali families continued to come to his home to ask questions and engage in discussions about how to enable their children's success. In response to a shared concern that their children were losing their native language and thus their ability to communicate with their parents, Mohamed established and taught a Somali parent-child native language class at the housing authority complex where he lived. Thus, the cultural brokering at this site cultivated new relationships and networks between parents that also catalyzed changes in the facilitators' own identities and sense of agency as community leaders.

Situating engagement in community. Unlike the cultural brokers hired and overseen by districts, the family allies of the Westfield Center were hired and housed by a community-based organization and assigned to one of the three focal schools. Although the family allies primarily provided access to community resources to meet basic family needs, they also situated parent

and family engagement within broader community building and community change efforts. Although these efforts seemed limited during our data collection, we saw evidence of more collective and relational cultural brokering grounded in a conception of parent and community engagement in education that encompassed schools as part of their broader community.

First, the family field trips discussed earlier situated family educational engagement in a broader community context, albeit mostly dominant cultural experiences and institutions, as described in the library example. For instance, an outing to a tulip festival gave parents and children a chance to interact, build relationships with teachers, engage in learning outside of school, and participate in a shared learning experience:

It was a family trip. A lot of the families that were going to be there don't have a big enough car for the whole family or don't have a car at all. So it was kind of like their yearly field trip with the family. . . . So the teachers came along and helped coordinate . . . hav[ing] the child engage with the parent and . . . there was learning [then], too, because . . . we had a treasure hunt for the kids or the family to get them looking and searching or learning. (Family ally, interview, August 26, 2013)

Thus, the family field trips were not solely socialization into dominant institutions. They were also an opportunity for cultural brokering that situated parent engagement in an out-of-school context and brokered community events and resources as learning opportunities for parents and children to participate in with other families as well as teachers.

Second, family allies actively recruited families to participate in school and community events. Some of these events were traditional school-based parent involvement events, such as the beginning of year open house, but others were community-based opportunities that broadened the notion of parent engagement in education beyond these traditional platforms. For instance, family allies helped families take a citizenship class offered by a local immigrant rights organization to assist naturalization candidates in completing their applications. Family allies also worked to engage families in Westfield Community Center's community summits, at which families could learn how to support their children's educational success within a broad context that included more traditional involvement (e.g., reading to young children at home) as well as engagement with the district's new biliteracy goal, housing and foreclosures, substance abuse, transportation, and community annexation to nearby larger cities.

Organizational Influences on Cultural Brokering Roles and Strategies

Our first set of findings might suggest a simplistic critique of individual cultural brokers for reinforcing dominant school norms and only occasionally enacting more empowering approaches. However, like the notion of

individual parents as intrinsically “hard to reach,” such a finding on its own obscures the broader power dynamics and ways in which organizational and policy contexts can shape cultural brokering work. Just as we have come to understand how school contexts shape *disengagement* for nondominant parents (Dyrness, 2011), we suggest a similar warrant for understanding cultural brokering work in the context of organizational or initiative goals that shape possibilities and constraints on engaging parents and families in schools. We turn next to the emergence of more innovative cultural brokering strategies amid the predominance of conventional approaches aligned with dominant policy goals. An organizational perspective helped illuminate two dynamics that seemed to provide openings for more collective, reciprocal, or relational approaches: (a) formal leadership actions and (b) boundary-spanning ambiguity.

Formal leadership. Although formal leadership often constrained more innovative cultural brokering to be consistent with broader policy aims, we also found a subset of individual leadership actions that reshaped institutional structures, policies, and practices or removed barriers to more reciprocal, relational, or collective approaches. In Kellogg, for example, district administrators changed the human resource policies to enable hiring of cultural brokers with cultural, linguistic, and experiential (e.g., having lived in a refugee camp) expertise but not college credit or high school diplomas. Similarly, in the case of the cultural broker who started a parent-child Somali language course, another district leader brokered relationships with the local housing authority to provide space. She also reworked district budgets to provide resources for PSS program child care, transportation, and community partnerships.

In addition, a few principals engaged cultural brokers as integral school staff members and resources in school leadership and decision making, particularly in creating opportunities for families to engage with the school. For instance, one Fairview principal worked with the family liaison as a key partner in shaping agendas and decisions to prioritize parents:

We work extremely well together. We click; our mind-sets are the same; we're thinking about it from a parent's perspective and the impact that a decision might have on them. So we have a really, really good working relationship. (Principal, May 31, 2013)

In contrast, a number of principals used staff designated as family engagement workers for support tasks, such as administering tests, administrative work, interpreting (but not advocating for families), and meeting basic family needs. Thus, although leadership reinforced conventional approaches and asymmetric power dynamics, they also provided critical openings in some cases.

Boundary-spanning ambiguity. As individuals who worked directly with parents and families, the cultural brokers were positioned at the

boundary between their schools and communities, which enabled them to be closer to families and their needs and concerns. Many of them described themselves as “bridges” or middlemen in connecting families with teachers or community resources and helping parents navigate issues at school. This boundary spanning enabled them to exchange information with families, which gave them insights into the school and student and family experiences and concerns.

Moreover, the means were ambiguously connected to the end goal of engaged families and successful students, and the daily work of family engagement was not closely monitored or measured. One family ally spoke of how widely their practices varied:

I share resources with a case load that I have. . . . We host events that are on topic, or on subject with students and families [that] strengthen families and then have the students do well in school. . . . That’s a little bit of what we do, it’s kind of hard to explain because we do so much. (Family ally, February 5, 2014)

Even among cultural brokers who had handbooks or scripted curricula to follow, there was still broad variation and autonomy in their moment-to-moment work.

The combination of boundary-spanning positions near families and a context of means-ends ambiguity seemed to provide organizational openings for cultural brokers to enact strategies responsive to family needs and priorities, sometimes in ways that departed from the initiatives’ conventional parent involvement goals. For instance, the parent-parent relationships fostered by Kellogg facilitators emerged as they invited parents to share experiences, ideas, and support with each other and interacted with parents before and after the classes. Likewise, in one Fairview school, Latina mothers became increasingly unhappy with the principal’s lack of response to their concerns that a single combined classroom did not meet the needs of special education or English language learners. With the family liaison’s help, parents wrote letters to the district; the principal was ultimately counseled out and replaced by one who was responsive to parent concerns. While the organizational context of means-ends ambiguity enabled this cultural broker to foster parent efforts to change the educational system, fear of adverse consequences served as a constraint to systematizing this approach.

Discussion

Because we intentionally selected sites that had struggled to meaningfully engage nondominant parents in the past, it may come as little surprise that the initiatives and cultural brokering work we studied tended to default to more conventional efforts to help families navigate the existing system by socializing them into school-centric, dominant cultural norms, expectations, and agendas. However, because the literature provides a relatively robust

understanding and critique of conventional policies and approaches to parent involvement (see e.g., Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Nakagawa, 2000; Schutz, 2006), we focus our discussion on the potential of the emergent collective, reciprocal, or relational cultural brokering as milestones in shifting power dynamics and transforming systems toward equitable collaborations. We also discuss the limitations of the broader initiative goals and family engagement policies that constrain such efforts as well as problematize assumptions about whose culture is being brokered to what end.

Cultural Brokering Potential for Equitable Family-School Relations

Each of the emergent approaches in this study suggests strategies that align with other scholarship focused on understanding and addressing educational disparities. Alone or even in tandem with each other, in this study, these strategies did not result in equitable collaboration and rarely resulted in transformative shifts, but we argue that they may be stepping stones toward cultivating collective family agency and influence to transform systems toward greater equity.

Cultural Brokering as Authentic Care

The mostly Latina family liaisons in Fairview seemed to prioritize cultural brokering strategies focused on building relationships with families. We suggest that their approach aligned with what Valenzuela (1999) discusses as “authentic care” rooted in an ethic of caring (Noddings, 1984). In the context of Latino communities that experience schooling as subtractive, Valenzuela’s study suggests the importance of such authentic care *for* people—and their culture, language, social, and cultural resources—as a key precedent to caring *about* schools and schooling. Like Latino para-educators who use subtle verbal and physical acts of caring to support Latino students (Rueda, Monzo, & Higareda, 2004), the Fairview liaisons used cultural practices to express authentic caring and create a more welcoming or trustworthy environment for families. Such an approach also relates to the collective, maternal, and political aspects of care found in “womanist caring” and African American traditions of “othermothering” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; C. W. Cooper, 2009). Consistent with Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004) contention that space (and capital) mediate parental engagement in schools, a personal, welcoming space can enable parents to author new relationships and actions in the school. Thus, a welcoming environment may constitute an early (though insufficient) condition along the journey to equitable collaboration.

Cultural Brokering as Catalyzing Parent Relationships and Leadership

Like other train-the-trainer models in which parents teach other parents, the PSS model enabled facilitators to act as catalysts in engaging parents

collectively and building new relationships and networks—or bonding social capital—with each other. In addition, though, the facilitators also transformed their own understanding, growth, and leadership. Like the individual leadership transformation described in much of the community organizing literature (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2011), the facilitators' cultural brokering work built a sense of agency and community leadership anchored in relationships with other parents, and the experience enabled them to take on other roles and responsibilities in the district and the community. Thus, as with the roles in equitable collaborations, the parents and community members who brokered these relationships began to be seen and to see themselves as leaders and change agents.

Cultural Brokering as Community Engagement

Consistent with equitable collaborations, the Westfield Center work approached student academic achievement and school reform as inextricably linked to issues in the community, including affordable housing, transportation, immigration, poverty, racism, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Although they were a minor aspect of Westfield family allies' work at the time, their cultural brokering strategies aimed to build families' participation and voice around these community issues. Consistent with equitable collaboration and studies of community-based engagement (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011; Warren et al., 2011), the Westfield cultural brokering approached nondominant families as key actors in political change processes and situated their engagement in broader community concerns that shaped students' educational opportunities and outcomes.

In sum, despite the predominance of conventional parent involvement approaches, our findings suggest that these emerging cultural brokering strategies may begin to develop the capacity and relationships of families to work together toward systemic change. Such efforts align with an emerging literature on bicultural, collective, and relational forms of parent engagement, which emphasize a more inclusive definition of engagement, an emphasis on relationships over activities, and families as leaders and change agents (Ishimaru, 2014; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Warren et al., 2009). As emergent approaches, though, they may be necessary but insufficient for equitable collaboration. Because the strategies emerged in spite of broader initiative goals and policy aims, we discuss the organizational goals and context as constraints on more equitable cultural brokering.

Organizational Goals and Conditions

The district and regional initiative goals for family engagement in this study reflected conventional theories of change regarding parent involvement, which aligns with the findings from other studies of school- and district-based initiatives (Guo, 2010; Olivos et al., 2011; Valdés, 1996). For

example, Auerbach's (2008) study of 12 educational leaders concluded that "most participants in this study defined parent involvement in education as a means to improve student achievement, in partnership with the school" (p. 709). Like Auerbach, we do not argue that improving academic achievement is a bad goal. But based on the present study and others, such an aim represents a narrow goal and a prescriptive, assimilative agenda for achieving it. The goal reinscribes existing power asymmetries by vesting the information and expertise about school-based achievement solely in professional educators and implying that good (e.g., compliant) parents will passively adopt the strategies offered to support their child's academic success. This contrasts with some nondominant families' more expansive notions of learning and success, such as the Mexican cultural conception of *educación*, which incorporates reciprocal respect and responsibility as well as broader conceptions of individual and community well-being (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; López et al., 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Wilson Cooper, 2009).

Our findings regarding the relationship between cultural brokering and organizational context align with findings from public sector research that boundary spanning reduces the influence of internal organizational norms on behavior (Robertson, 1995). Thus, although cultural brokers often reinforced deficit-based interactions with families, the exceptions to this dynamic highlight the organizational affordances that might enable those in boundary spanning roles to tap the information and expertise of nondominant families for improving schools.

For equitable approaches and familial and community-based expertise to become the norm in schools rather than the exception, though, we must interrogate the assumptions that underlie the initiative goals and organizational conditions that shape cultural brokering work. The default approaches in our study—and the goals that shaped them—often positioned cultural brokers to use their shared cultural, linguistic, and social resources to educate families solely about school goals and expectations and impart only dominant cultural capital to parents. Moreover, to the extent that brokering takes the form of educating teachers about families' cultures, a single individual cannot adequately represent an entire cultural community. Such an expectation risks essentializing complex and varied cultural participation and perhaps even enacting institutional gatekeeping.

Study Limitations

We initially used the concept of cultural brokers simply to identify individuals whose *formal* role involved direct interactions with parents and families to engage them in schools. This raises two limitations. First, the individuals hired to engage families were often bilingual, had formal U.S. higher education, and possessed understandings and skills navigating school systems. Thus, they were likely selected for their ability to adhere to status

quo expectations of schools and educators in ways that might reflect—or even reinforce—the power hierarchies among nondominant families. Such dynamics *between* nondominant families may have had important implications for who got access to brokering opportunities, whose voices were heard, and whose culture was brokered. Second, by focusing on formal family engagement roles, we may have overlooked people in cultural brokering roles who were not formally or explicitly designated to liaison with families, such as more traditional institutional agents (e.g., teachers, counselors, or instructional aides) or community-based informal leaders.

We also examined formal cultural brokers within initiatives in a common collaborative regional context that had been recognized and selected for their strong vision and focus on parent engagement. The common regional context of marked racial and cultural diversity may have highlighted cultural brokering work more prominently than a study conducted in a more homogeneous setting. And because this study took place primarily among elementary schools, we note that engagement efforts at the secondary level may take quite different forms. Last, because the focus on cultural brokers emerged from a broader study, we have limited observational data about the day-to-day practice of cultural brokers. Future research focused on cultural brokering *practice* might provide more detailed portraits of how brokering unfolds on a daily scale to improve on-the-ground practice.

Conclusions and Implications for Theory and Practice

Although the initial phases of our study emphasized the perceptions and actions of individual cultural brokers charged with engaging families in their various initiatives, this study suggests that a central analytic focus on cultural brokering practices and contexts may provide richer theoretical and practical insights into the complexities of building equitable family-school relations. The perspective of equitable collaboration in tandem with boundary spanning helped to illuminate cultural brokering strategies and organizational conditions that not only reinforce existing asymmetries of social and cultural capital or improve access to information, networks, and opportunities in the existing system but also those that aim to transform the field of existing power asymmetries between nondominant families and schools.

Although the notion of “culture” in this study refers to broader notions of cultural and social capital beyond ethnic identity alone, those typically selected to “broker” cultures often share a marginalized status with the families they engage. As such, scrutiny of their actions alone may inadvertently reinforce a conception of the problem as residing in people from nondominant communities rather than in the broader system and the other actors in it. Theoretically, teachers, principals, support staff, counselors, parent leaders, nonprofit community staff, and even district administrators might engage

in cultural brokering without belonging to the same community or without formal designation.

This is not to naively suggest, however, that everyone can or does engage in cultural brokering with the potential for equitable collaboration. Different educational actors may have particular repertoires of cultural brokering practices available to them, depending on their power inside or outside the system (as well as organizational factors). For instance, the leadership we described as an enabling condition might be recast as a form of cultural brokering work aimed at the system to create more accessible, transparent, and culturally responsive institutions. That is, given the power asymmetries and normative assumptions about the role of parents in schools, a critical form of cultural brokering may be the work of those with formal power in schools and districts. People in these roles might tap family-based agendas, expertise, and social and cultural capital to transform the dominant systems and practices of teaching, learning, and engagement. Thus, future studies might draw on the concept of cultural brokering to examine organizational contexts that leverage more equitable approaches, especially toward shifts in institutional policies, structures, and more expansive repertoires of practice, norms, and agendas.

Districts and community-based organizations that hire individuals into cultural brokering roles with little attention to their practice and context may find they replicate—rather than disrupt—school-centric, deficit-based approaches to families. The emerging strategies identified in this study suggest foundational practices that may function as stepping stones toward more collective, relational, and reciprocal engagement. Such approaches implicate shifts in the organizational context and assumptions about the expertise and social and cultural resources of nondominant families. For instance, similar to Pushor's (2014) work with preservice teachers, system-based cultural brokering might entail creating opportunities for teachers and educational leaders to learn from nondominant families to improve teaching and learning. Similarly, co-design of learning environments or policies *with* nondominant families—not simply represented by cultural brokers—offers potential for engaging more expansive notions of learning and education (Bang, Faber, Gurneau, Marin, & Soto, 2016). Such practices might foster more equitable cultural brokering and organizational contexts along the journey toward equitable collaboration between families, communities, and schools.

Notes

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¹We use the terms *families* and *parents* interchangeably throughout this article, but our usage includes guardians, family members, and caretakers.

²All names of initiatives, organizations, and individuals are pseudonyms.

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