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Political Maternal Involvement: A Comparative Study of Mexican Mothers' Activism to Address School Board's Deficit Practices

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Drawing from ethnographic research in two sites in California, we examine how school boards' deficit practices create barriers for mothers. We analyze how school boards acted as gatekeepers to educational opportunities and maternal involvement. Our analysis reveals that mothers activated their agency as parents to foster civic capacity and create change in their local school systems. Findings support the emerging body of literature that calls for more collaborative models that acknowledge families' cultural knowledge. [Comparative ethnography; family and school partnerships; maternal involvement]

Parent involvement initiatives have a long history as a strategy to improve student outcomes (Alfaro et al. 2006; Barnard 2004; Ceja 2004; Cline and Necochea 2001; Durand 2011; Dyrness 2011; Jeynes 2003; Lee and Bowen 2006; LeFevre and Shaw 2011). However, many of the traditional parent involvement models embed deficit assumptions about students, families, and communities. Valencia and Solórzano (1997) state that deficit assumptions are based on perceptions that place the blame on the individual and account the deficiencies to the individual's skills, knowledge, and/or culture. These assumptions can impact the overall success of historically marginalized students (Gutiérrez 2006; Perez Carreon et al. 2005). Despite the research that has documented the deficit approaches to parent involvement, educational initiatives continue to engage in the traditional models (Epstein 1995; Fine 1993).

Scholars in the field of family engagement and school partnerships have begun to explore ways to develop more culturally sensitive approaches to parent involvement models (Ishimaru 2014; Warnick 2014). The proposed conceptual models to parent involvement seek to grant authority to parents as decision makers in their children's education by acknowledging their culture, knowledge, and goals for their children's education (Ishimaru 2014; Mediratta et al. 2009; Warnick 2014; Warren 2005). These efforts frame parents as collaborators and as knowledgeable resources who can help improve the educational systems (Warren 2010). The literature has established that this collaborative parent involvement framework can lead to positive student outcomes (Bryk et al. 2010; Durand 2011; LeFevre and Shaw 2011; Warren 2010); however, it is important to consider the role of school boards as decision makers. Thus, the objective of this article is to examine how school boards acted as gatekeepers to educational opportunities and maternal involvement. We also analyze how the mothers activated their agency and engage in activism to challenge the school boards' deficit practices. Specifically, this article provides a comparative examination of the activist work lead by mothers in two communities. Through this research we aim to understand how mothers' activism and political influence can

create avenues for school boards to collaborate with parents to improve the education of low-income Latina/o students.

Role of School Boards

Traditionally, school boards are responsible for making decisions based on the needs, values, and expectations of the local community (Kirst and Wirt 2010). Within the context of public education, school boards are officials elected by their local community (Resnick 1999). School boards fulfill their primary role by “setting direction for the school system, establishing an effective and efficient structure, providing support, ensuring accountability, and proving community leadership as advocates” for the community (California School Board Association 2016). Although school boards have the power to make decisions regarding educational programs and policies, they must make decisions based on the community’s values. Resnick (1999) indicates that in order for school boards to be effective, they must involve community members. Thus, it is important to consider how school boards integrate (or not) the views of parents in their decision-making process. Kirst and Wirt (2010) state that when parents and school boards work together, the decisions made could be more reflective of the community’s needs, values, and goals. Nonetheless, if school boards hold a deficit view of the decision-making power of parents, or if they have a different political agenda, conflict could arise (Kirst and Wirt 2010). Therefore, an important consideration for researchers and practitioners is to document the forms of parent involvement that oftentimes may not be recognized or valued.

Latina/o Parent Involvement

The literature that examines the role of Latina/o parent involvement on the academic outcomes of children is well established (Alfaro et al. 2006; Barnard 2004; Ceja 2004; Cline and Necochea 2001; Durand 2011; Dyrness 2011; Jeynes 2003; Lee and Bowen 2006; LeFevre and Shaw 2011). However, there are inconsistent definitions of parent involvement. For example, traditional frameworks of parent involvement are defined as the practices of active parent participation in tutoring, fundraising, volunteering in school activities, and engaging in parent-teacher association (PTA) activities (Epstein 1995). In contrast, Latina/o parents engage in more informal parent involvement practices that incorporate emotional support, parent-child discussion, *consejos* (advice), and cultural narratives (Auerbach 2007; Barnard 2004; Delgado-Gaitan 1992, 1994; López 2001; Manzo 2016). The seminal work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992, 2005) has recognized these less visible forms of parent involvement as *funds of knowledge*. Funds of knowledge “refers to [the] historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez 2005, 73). Incorporating parents’ funds of knowledge and validating their less visible forms of parent involvement has potential for the development of school initiatives that engage parents in the decision-making process (Manzo 2016). Although the literature that acknowledges the less visible forms of parent involvement are well-established, few studies have made efforts to more precisely define the involvement of Latina/o parents as advocacy and/or activism. Moreover, there is very limited research on maternal involvement and activism.

Latina Maternal Involvement

Few studies document the involvement of Latina mothers in their children’s education.

Olmedo (2003) documents how Latina mothers in Chicago used strategies for resistance when they felt the school did not acknowledge their values and culture. Olmedo (2003) suggests that educators need to understand that immigrant mothers may exercise their agency through their *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al. 1992, 2005). In *Mothers United*, Dyrness (2011) also documents the struggle of Latina mothers who, despite their language and educational limitations, organized in support of the new small school reform movement in Oakland. Dyrness (2011) describes how a group of Latina mothers were perceived as the “least powerful actors” (4) among those involved in the small school reform movement. Nonetheless, the Latina mothers managed to create a counterspace where they could organize and strategized. Yosso (2006) also documents how *Madres por la Educación* organized and strategized to combat educators’ deficit thinking in order to improve the quality of education for their children. Similarly, Villenas (2001) documents the counternarratives of eleven Latina mothers, who in the face of deficit thinking, described themselves as moral and cultural educators who resisted racism and discrimination through their cultural practices. Furthermore, Villenas (2001) indicates that the mothers’ teaching of resistance and resiliency in the home is the genesis for creating resistance at the community level.

Therefore, this study contributes to the Latina mother involvement literature by examining how school board–parent relationships facilitate or do not facilitate the active mother involvement in two farmworking communities. More specifically, this study employs community-based research approach where two groups of mothers formed partnerships with the researchers to address the unequal access to education and challenge the deficit school board practices. Through their advocacy and activist work, the mothers have been the political force behind the community-level changes to education. We build on the concept of “political mothering” (Pardo 1998) by integrating a *borderlands* (Anzaldúa 1987) theoretical framework and civic capacity (Stone 2001) to provide a comparative analysis of the ways the Mexican immigrant mothers navigate the institutional and societal borders of the schools to transform into agents of change in their community.

Theoretical Framework

We build on Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of borderlands to illuminate how within this structural framework, social and institutional actors, in particular school board members, construct and maintain boundaries of social membership. Much like the literal Mexican–U.S. border, these boundaries separate, marginalize, and create conflict between Latina/o parents and schools (Alvarez 1995, 451). In Squire Town and the Esperanza Town, several structural factors enabled school board members to act as gatekeepers and control access to educational opportunities (all names are pseudonyms). Our comparative analysis provides a picture of how a particularly configured matrix of domination (Collins 2002) transcends the spheres of school and community to constrain Latina women immigrants’ mobility and personal autonomy, and inhibit their participation in their children’s education.

The concept of civic capacity within the education field calls for *participation* and *responsibility* from those involved (Stone 2001). More specifically, in terms of participation, stakeholders, or in this case school boards, are seen as active participants as they are the ones who make the ultimate decisions about educational programs and policies at the local level. Nonetheless, part of their *participation* requires making resources available or establishing collaborations in the community. A civic capacity lens can help shift the deficit perspectives by allowing school boards to focus on the cultural assets of parents and allowing them to participate in the decision-making process of local education programs

and policies (Ishimaru 2013, 2014 ; Warren et al. 2009). Once school boards shift their perspective about parents' ability to participate in the decision-making process the second element, understanding, of civic capacity will follow. Having a common understanding and shared vision for education can help strengthen relationships between school boards and parents as a way to increase family engagement.

Together, a borderlands framework and civic capacity allows us to examine the ways that parents resist the deficit practices of their local school boards and, in turn, activate their civic capacity to become politically active in their local education systems. Moreover, by integrating a borderlands framework and civic capacity, this article makes a theoretical contribution to the way researchers examine the role of mothers in the school system. More specifically, this allows us to engage in a systemic analysis of how farmworker women challenge school board members. We do not argue that school board members purposefully seek to exclude farmworkers and immigrants. Nor, do we wish to discount the efforts of many dedicated school board members. Rather, our interest lies in the ways in which the institutional positions of these actors operate to enforce borders of social membership through the regulation of the decision-making process.

Research Design and Methods

Mahler and Pessar (2006) highlight the need for more comparative research; thus, our study represents a response to move away from the single ethnographic case study. This article is based on separate, ethnographic research projects Esperanza Town and Squire Town, two farmworking communities. We engaged in ethnographic research, which Villenas (2012) refers to as ethnography *de lucha* (of struggle), as a way to address the deficit practices enacted by the school boards. Dr. Manzo has spent seven years conducting research with communities in the Central Valley. Her work began in 2010 through an initiative to develop a school–community partnership. Through her involvement in the community, the mothers contacted Dr. Manzo to ask for guidance when the school board refused to renew the superintendent's contract. Dr. Deeb-Sossa spent the last eight years conducting participant observation and in-depth interviews with farmworking families who reside in Squire Town. Farmworkers in Squire Town invited Dr. Deeb-Sossa in the summer of 2009 to help them challenge the decision of the school district to close the elementary school, the only school in the rural community.

In the tradition of "public sociology," (Anderson 1989; Clawson et al. 2007), both our projects are grounded in "politically engaged" research with and in the two farmworking immigrant communities of Esperanza Town and Squire Town. We conducted our projects in alignment with the farmworking communities through advocacy and educational activities such as acting as interpreters for immigrants who seek to navigate local school systems, connecting them with resources, and strategizing how to challenge school board decisions. We have worked in collaboration with local community groups, government agencies, and other organizations that have sought to address the conditions facing farmworkers in these rural communities. Each of us established tutoring and mentoring groups for farmworker children and literacy classes for parents and continue to act as a resource for these groups.

Positionality

As feminist researchers, we recognize how our social locations have shaped our work as well as our access to the communities with which we work. Dr. Manzo began her work in Esperanza town at the same time when she began her doctorate program. She grew up

in Esperanza Town and to this date has family and friends who still reside in the community. Her cultural knowledge and personal connections to the community afforded her the ability to connect with community members. Dr. Deeb-Sossa is a light-skinned Colombian woman from Bogotá who was an advocate/university faculty member at the time of this research. Their level of commitment, and knowledge of the communities, facilitated their engagement with the mothers. Moreover, Dr. Manzo's and Dr. Deeb-Sossa's knowledge of the education system allowed them to act as cultural brokers by informing the mothers about their rights as parents and about how to follow protocols during the school board meetings to ensure that their concerns were heard. We both worked with the mothers in a collaborative manner in which they identified the issues they felt needed to be address. In return, we would assist them in finding the information and resources in order to create more equitable access to education in their respective communities.

Research Sites

Squire Town is located in Northern California's agricultural heartland with a population under 3,000. More than 65 percent of the residents in the community identify as Latinos/as. About 51 percent of the population holds a high school diploma, and the town has an unemployment rate of 15 percent. Its economy relies on several industrial canneries and casinos located nearby. Squire Town residents live in the area because of its proximity to work and its affordability. However, living on the municipality's fringe comes with costs such as no flood control, health dangers from local soil, and dependence on rural-character services (e.g., a student run community/rural clinic). Similarly, Esperanza Town is the smallest city in the county with a population of less than 4,000. More than 90 percent of the residents in this community identify themselves as Latinas/os. The poverty rate is about 35 percent, and the primary source of employment is agricultural labor. There is one local elementary school and a high school located about five miles away. Similar to Squire Town, Esperanza Town is dependent on rural-character services such as rural transit services.

School Boards

In both sites, the school board members were elected officials from the community. As indicated by the California School Board Association (CSBA), school board members must be residents of the local community they serve and must be citizens of the state. In addition, school board members may not be employees of the school district during their term. School board members serve for four-year terms. Aligned with the school board regulations, all school board members in both sites were residents of the local community and were not employees of the school district. All school board members in the two sites had been elected by local voters.

At the time when the school board decided not to renew the superintendent's contract there were seven school board members serving the local school district in Esperanza Town. Of the seven school board members, three were Latino men. The other board members were female, of which three were of Latina descent and one was white. Of the seven school board members in Esperanza town, four of the school board members had never served on school boards in the past, while three had served at least two terms.

In February 2009, when the school in Squire Town was closed by a five to two vote by the school board, there were a total of seven school board members. The school board president was of Latina decent, while the other six school board members were white. Of the five school board members, one was female and four were male. All school board members lived in Timberland, a community within district boundaries approximately thirty minutes away from this rural agricultural town.

Mother Participants

The number of mothers attending school board meetings and community meetings in each of the sites varied, but on average, there was an average of fifteen mothers in attendance in all the meetings in Esperanza Town and an average of eight mothers in Squire Town. Mothers in Esperanza town were primarily immigrants from Mexico who had been in the United States for about fifteen years. Their average level of education was ninth grade. All mothers in Esperanza Town who participated in this study were over the age of thirty. Mothers in Squire Town were primarily immigrants from Michoacán, Mexico, who had been in the United States for more than fifteen years. Their average level of education was eighth grade. All mothers in Squire Town who participated in this study were over the age of thirty-five. In this study, we highlight the voices of two mothers in Esperanza Town and four in Squire Town. Additionally, we also highlight the voice of Juliana, a community organizer in Squire Town. Below we briefly describe each of the seven participants in this study.

Esperanza Town participants. Betty and Maria are both mothers who reside in Esperanza Town. Betty migrated from Mexico fifteen years ago and has lived in Esperanza Town since she migrated to the US. She is married and has three children, two daughters and a son. One of her daughters has special needs due to a birth defect. As a result of her daughter's conditions, Betty learned that she needed to be actively involved in the school system to ensure her daughter's needs are met. She constantly attends school meetings and is also involved in community organizations such as church groups. She only speaks Spanish but attends English classes when they are offered in the community. Maria also resides in Esperanza Town. She migrated to the US twenty years ago and has lived in two other communities before moving to Esperanza Town. She is also married with three children, two daughters and a son. Similar to Betty, Maria also attends every school meeting. Maria speaks English and oftentimes acts as a translator for other mothers in the community.

Squire Town participants. Pilar, Ofelia, and Clara are originally from Michoacan, Mexico, and have resided in Squire Town an average of twenty-five years. All of them are married. Ofelia has five children, three daughters and two sons. The eldest son graduated from high school in 2016 and was accepted to UC Los Angeles. Ofelia has always been actively involved in the school system to ensure her children's needs are met. She constantly attends school meetings and is also involved in community organizations. She speaks Spanish, understands English, and attends English classes when they are offered to the local women's group. Clara is Ofelia's eldest sister, who also resides in Squire Town. She has three daughters. Similar to Ofelia, Clara also attends every school meeting. One of her daughters has special needs due social anxiety as result of her father's death, Clara's husband. As a result of her daughter's condition, Clara is actively involved in the school system and constantly attends school meetings. Similar to her sister, Clara's primary language is Spanish, but she understands English. Pilar, who has resided the longest in Squire Town, for over thirty-five years, has two daughters, one who is twenty-five years old and one in her teens. Similar to both Ofelia and Clara, Pilar also attends every school meeting. She speaks English fluently and acts as a translator for other mothers in the community. Julieta is also from La Piedad, Michoachan, Mexico. Her family came to the U.S. during the Bracero program. She works in the fields. Julieta is in her mid-forties and has two daughters and a son. She attends school meetings when her work schedule permits.

Juliana, the California Rural Legal Assistant Foundation (CRLF) community organizer, is originally from Texas and spent many years in the Chicana/o movement. The CRLF is a venue for farmworkers to file grievances, have legal resources, and advocacy. The CRLF has a three-pronged approach: (1) community advocacy—education and presentation on workers' rights; (2) A program for elderly, disabled, mental health, and sexual harassment; and (3) support for people who are detained in immigration holds and are incarcerated and have no access to bail.

Data

The overarching purpose of our research *de lucha* was to resist the deficit practices enacted by the school boards in each of the sites by co-constructing knowledge with the mothers through community meetings in preparation for the school board meetings. We employed several ethnographic methods of data collection including observations, recording of field notes, participant interviews, and continuous formal and informal dialogues. Finally, we collected documents including meeting agendas and minutes, other district publications, and media releases.

In Esperanza Town, Dr. Manzo started working with community members in 2009 in the development of a community–school partnership. Dr. Manzo facilitated educational workshops for the mothers over a period of four years from 2010 to 2014. During her involvement with the community over the years, she collected observations and field notes from the interactions with the mothers and the school district personnel. Additionally, all workshops were facilitated in a focus group format, and each session was recorded and transcribed for future analysis. As a result of her active and long-term engagement, she gained access to archival documents including school board meeting agendas, minutes, and a Grand Jury Report. From 2009–2014, Dr. Manzo attended an average of two school board meetings per year, through which she recorded participant observations and field notes. During the 2014–2015 academic year, she accompanied the mothers to five school board meetings and three community forums. In accordance to the Brown Act, all of the school board meetings and community forums were held as public meetings. All agendas were posted prior to the meeting, and minutes were available to the public after the meeting.

Prior to the meetings, Dr. Manzo would meet with the mothers to review the meeting agenda and discuss possible ways in which parents could participate in the meetings. School board members were aware that Dr. Manzo was conducting a research study in the community and that she was present in the room with the participating mothers. All meetings were held in English; there were times when Dr. Manzo would translate for the mothers and other times another community member or a translator provided by the district would translate. At the end of the 2014–2015 academic year, Dr. Manzo conducted individual interviews with two of the mothers to debrief about their participation in the school board meetings and community forums. The interviews were conducted in Spanish.

In Squire Town, Dr. Deeb-Sossa was invited into the community in 2009 after the school board made the decision to close the school. Dr. Deeb-Sossa met with the mothers during their weekly meetings to discuss the previous school board meetings, review the meeting agenda, and discuss possible ways in which parents could organize and challenge the decision to close the elementary school. During the summer of 2009, Dr. Deeb-Sossa conducted individual interviews with three of the mothers to debrief about their participation in the school board meetings and community forums. The interviews were

conducted in Spanish. Dr. Deeb-Sossa also conducted a focus group with mothers, community organizers, and other leaders to discuss their participation in the school board meetings and community forums during the winter of 2009, and in the fall, spring, and summer of 2010. Since the closure of the school, Dr. Deeb-Sossa has been actively engaged in facilitating *El Grupo de Mujeres* (Women's Group) with the mothers in Squire Town. Through her involvement with the Grupo de Mujeres, Dr. Deeb-Sossa has been able to collect *testimonios* (oral testimonies) from the multiple *pláticas* (heart-to-heart talks) conducted with the farmworker women, as well as from ethnographic field notes taken systematically during direct observation with community members in Squire Town. These talks have allowed for the mothers' experiences as immigrants, experiences with school officials, and their mobilization efforts around the school closure to be discussed in a safe environment (Deeb-Sossa 2015; Deeb-Sossa and Moreno 2016).

Analyses

After recording and transcribing data from interviews, meetings, and formal and informal dialogues with the mothers in each site, we read each of the data sets to identify descriptive patterns and inductive codes (Maxwell 2005). We also developed comparative codes and categories that emerged in both sites (Maxwell and Miller 2008). We then coded the data based on components of the theoretical framework, such as the school boards acting as gatekeepers or creating borders for the mothers who sought to become involved in their children's education, and how mothers activated their community capacity to become active participants in their children's education and how they sought out additional resources for the community. Finally, using both inductive and deductive codes, we analyzed the data to examine how the mothers' role as activist transcended other social spaces in their respective community.

Findings

The objective of this paper was to examine how school boards acted as gatekeepers to educational opportunities and maternal involvement. Our analysis revealed two key findings: (1) how the school boards became gatekeepers of educational opportunities in each of the respective communities by engaging in deficit practices, and (2) the maternal involvement practices of the mothers who became agents of change. Overall, the findings examine how school board–parent relationships facilitate or do not facilitate the active mother involvement in the two communities. Moreover, the findings bring to the forefront the advocacy and activist work of the mothers that resulted in the political force behind the community-level changes to education.

School Boards as Structural Gatekeepers of Educational Opportunities

In both of the communities, there has been a history of the school boards acting as the gatekeepers of educational opportunities by concealing or providing wrongful information to Latina mothers. In 2009, the trustees of the Timberland Joint Unified School District (pseudonym), in Northern California, decided to close the only elementary school in Squire Town, and the farmworker mothers wanted to have a voice as to what would happen with the children who attended the school. The trustees cited "money issues" as the main cause to close the school. However, the school board members never mentioned to the community that another elementary school was being built in a more affluent neighborhood within the district despite the budgetary difficulties. As one of the farmworker mothers in Squire Town, Pilar, complained about the closure of the school,

"Why is it always the poor who are affected? It was our school that got closed, not the ones in wealthier communities" (field notes, 2009). In this case, within the context of the borderland framework, the school board created a class border that prevented the low-income children from attending a local school in their community. The mothers' reaction to the closure of school indicates that they were aware of the deficit perspectives the school system held of the low-income students in the community. More specifically, the mothers' reaction indicates they knew the school district would not provide adequate resources to their children, thus preventing the children from having access to a quality education.

Similarly, in Esperanza Town during the summer of 2009, a grand jury report was filed. The County Grand Jury underwent investigations after a community member complained about the district's activities. One of the concerns raised in the report was that one of the board members did not reside within the district. Additional issues of micromanagement, lack of accountability for employee performance, and nepotism were raised. The board then reacted by having several emergency meetings, but there was very little mention in the meeting minutes of the concerns outlined in the report. Around the time of the grand jury report, the district was also facing financial difficulties. In response, the Esperanza Town School District hired an interim chief business officer (CBO). The CBO made several recommendations to cut the budget by reducing classified services such as instructional assistants, bus drivers, and secretaries. It is important to note that at the time of grand jury investigation, many of the classified employees had some sort of personal or familial connection to members of the school (field notes, 2009). Thus, the school board disagreed with the CBO's proposal and terminated the interim CBO's contract. In the case of Esperanza Town, the school board demonstrated that it was not engaging in their responsibility as elected officials to represent the values of the community. Rather, the school board was acting within their own interest by engaging in activities that were not related to enhancing the education system for the benefit of the children.

In both communities, the mothers took a more active position within their children's school and, in turn, also took a more politically active role in their community. For example, they started to gather information about the educational rights of their children and the possibility of opening a charter school in Squire Town. In the summer of 2009, Julianna, a community organizer from the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (CRLAF), connected the mothers with local academics with an expertise on charter schools and with lawyers specializing in education. That summer, they attended every school board meeting. At these four school board meetings, they demanded the school remain open for their children, given that test scores were improving every year; that their children felt comfortable in their school; and that the school was a vital part of Squire Town.

In 2010, after the grand jury investigation in Esperanza Town, the mothers also began taking a more active role by attending monthly educational workshops with Dr. Manzo. The workshops were focused on education topics selected by the mothers. Many of the mothers had identified issues such as the role of the school board and other relevant issues they were encountering with the school system such as the hiring process of qualified teachers and personnel. The workshops were delivered in an interactive manner that allowed the mothers to discuss the selected topics. Toward the end of 2010, the mothers began to share that the workshops were an avenue for them to learn about different ways they could advocate for their children's education. For example, they shared that they started to attend more school board meetings and would present their concerns and demands to the school board during the public comments session.

In both instances described above, the school boards acted as educational gatekeepers who were not engaging in activities that would benefit the low-income Latina/o students in the community. In Squire Town, the school board decided to close the local school and open another one in a nearby community. In Esperanza Town, the school board decided not to follow the recommendations of the CBO and continued to engage practices such as nepotism and micromanagement. However, the mothers in both communities activated their civic capacity to transcend those borders and become advocates for their children's education. As described by Stone (2001), the concept of civic capacity within the education field calls for participation and responsibility from those involved. In this case, the mothers began to take action and responsibility for their children's education by participating in activities that would help them find resources for their children. For example, the mothers in both communities attended school board meetings and would participate more during the public comment session. Moreover, their actions to become active participants in their children's education led them to hold the school boards accountable for their deficit practices of not acting within the values of the respective communities to provide adequate resources such as a school nearby or investing in academic programs that would benefit the children's education.

A prime example of how the mothers held the school boards accountable occurred in Esperanza Town in 2014. Towards the end of 2014, the school board announced that they would not renew the current superintendent's contract. The superintendent had been in that position for three years and had been working for the school district for the last fifteen years. He grew up in the community and attended school in the area. The mothers were upset because after many years of political turmoil, which resulted in high turnover of the administration staff, there was finally one administrator who understood the community and was advocating for better educational opportunities. When the school board announced they would not renew the contract, the mothers asked for an explanation, but the board refused to answer their questions. This made the mothers very upset, and they began to organize by attending school board meetings and community forums to learn more about the process of hiring a superintendent.

Similarly, in Squire town during the closure of the local school, the mothers started to activate their civic capacity and engaged in actions that began to shed light on the inadequate actions taken by the school boards. As one mother in Squire Town, Ofelia, recalled how they had to learn about process and procedures to address the school board formally so that their concerns would be taken seriously:

At our first school board, fifteen parents went. We had chosen two as our spokespeople. But the board, they were very sly and did what only a very devious person would do, they went and told the press that only two parents were concerned about the closure of the school. They told the newspapers that only two parents went to the school board meeting, and they never mentioned the other fifteen parents because they only counted the two that went up to the mic. (field notes, 2009)

The farmworker mothers in Squire Town were aided by the CRLAF community organizer, Juliana, and strategized on how to maximize their presence at the next school board meeting. As the community organizer recalled in an interview with Dr. Deeb-Sossa:

We had to find a way to maximize our presence and make our voice count. All, parents and children, everybody, must go up to the mic and even if you blank out, and even if you just say, "I agree with the parent that spoke in front of me," then that is all you have to say with your name and you will be counted. (2010)

At the second board meeting in Squire Town, all parents who attended, regardless of whether they spoke only Spanish, went up to the microphone, said their name, and made sure they were counted. A mother, Clara, noted at a Grupo de Mujeres meeting¹, "I think it was more than fifty-five parents who ended up getting counted along with students."

On the other hand, the mothers in Esperanza Town contacted Dr. Manzo during the beginning of 2015 asking for her guidance to find information about the Brown Act rules because the school board was claiming that the parents could not question them regarding their decision to not renew the superintendent's contract. The Brown Act rules are the guidelines for conducting public meetings. The Brown Act requires that any and all members of the school board conduct their meetings and deliberations within the public's presence. The public cannot be prohibited from criticizing the policies, procedures, or content of a meeting, but the school board conducting the meeting does have a right to set a reasonable time limitation for each individual speaker or group. The mothers also wanted to know more about their rights to be provided with documents in Spanish. One of the mothers, Betty, recalled:

They always tell us to shut up when we go up to the microphone or that our time is up, and we need to sit down. If they don't tell us to shut up, they just don't even listen to us, and just ignore us. It's like we are not even there. (field notes, 2015)

This instance describes how the Esperanza Town School Board attempted to create a linguistic border for the mothers who wanted to participate in the decision-making process by limiting their time to speak and by not providing a translator. Although the mothers felt voiceless and disempowered by the school board's actions, they once again activated their civic capacity by seeking outside resources to become informed and advocated for their children's education.

At the following meeting in March of 2015, Dr. Manzo attended the board meeting with mothers in Esperanza Town and asked for a translator to be present. Prior to the meeting, Dr. Manzo worked with the mothers on drafting a letter and a petition to the school board asking for an explanation of why they decided to remove the superintendent. In their letter, the mothers cited their rights as parents and the need for translation services as stated in the California Educational Code. During the open comment session, a group of five mothers went up to the microphone to speak. However, at that moment, the school board president informed the mothers they only had one minute to make their comments. By limiting the mothers time to speak, the school board was creating a border for the mothers to not voice their concerns about their children's education and their rights as parents. After listening to the mothers citing the education code, the board allowed the mothers to continue reading their letter and present their petition to the board. Although the mothers were allowed to speak for a total of eight minutes, there was no response to mothers' requests. Once again, the school board dismissed the mothers as active participants who were engaging in practices that aimed to hold the school board accountable for their deficit practices. Despite the board not responding to the mothers' request, the fact that the board allowed them to speak for more than one minute is indicative of the power and the civic capacity of the mothers.

The work of Reinikka and Svensson (2005) serves as a model to exemplify the power of informed, educated people. For example, they found that school enrollment increased when the newspaper campaign was near the school and near the newspaper outlet. However, in the case of Squire Town and Esperanza Town, creating change took more than informing the mothers about their rights. In Squire Town, Ofelia said, "nothing

changed their minds. Nothing got to them, not even tears from both mothers and children. Not even the cheers that the children did, showing how proud they were about their school" (field notes, 2009). Another mother in Squire Town, Pilar, who had attended the board meetings recalled:

They lied to us. They tricked us. They were racist. They targeted our school. They said that they were closing another school in a neighboring town, but that was a lie, they only closed it temporarily, because they were replacing it with newer building. So, they only closed our elementary school. (field notes, 2009)

As another farmworker mother, Clara, recalled:

The school district defended its decision to close the school by arguing that it was a money issue. They said it would help close a \$7 million deficit. But, why is it always the poor that get affected? It was our school that got closed, not the ones in wealthier communities. (field notes, 2009)

Another mother in Squire Town, Julieta, noted how the school district officials argued that they were closing the school "for the good of the community."

Similarly, in Esperanza Town, the school board refused to provide any explanations and moved forward with hiring a consulting firm to search for a new superintendent. In March of 2015, during a meeting with Dr. Manzo, Maria, a mother of four children who had been in the district for five years drew comparison to the previous district her children attended. She stated, "in this district they [school board members] do not care about our children's education. All they care about is themselves and about hiring people who will do favors for them." Later, the mothers who were meeting with Dr. Manzo claimed that the board was not making good use of school funds as the "consulting firm" had only been established two days prior the district's approval to contract with the firm. During another school board meeting the mothers in Esperanza Town went up to the microphone during open comment portion of the meeting, and stated:

The consulting firm to hire the new superintendent is not a legitimate organization. The business has only been established for two days, and the person running organization has no experience in the education system. We know that the person in charge [of the organization] is connected to friends of the school board president so it is clear that this issue is of personal interest to the president. (field notes, March 17, 2015)

The mothers in Esperanza Town, once again, were holding the school board responsible for their actions by publicly stating information that demonstrated how the school board was not performing their official duties.

Similarly, in Squire Town, the CRLAF community organizer, Juliana, also recalled how the school board members decided to close the elementary school and how the mothers attempted to hold them accountable. In an interview Juliana explained:

When we were saying that we were getting discriminated, that parents of students at ...school were getting discriminated, they [the school board members] kept saying no. They said to us that they had this other school in [neighboring town] that they also were going to close... But what they didn't tell the parents from Squire Town is that the school in [neighboring town] was marked to be closed because another one was being built a few blocks from there, and this was in a very well-to-do neighborhood. That was not broadcasted at all and so that is what happened. (Interview with Dr. Deeb-Sossa, 2010)

The community organizer, Juliana, and the mothers were aware of how they were discriminated against and disenfranchised based on their class and race. As the mothers indicated, even in a climate of austerity cuts, “those who are affluent are not impacted as much, if at all.” In the mothers’ view, it was at their expense that the well-to-do children had a new elementary school in their neighborhood. In this case, the mothers exemplified how the school board had created a class border that prevented them from having access to a quality education. More specifically, the fact that the school board decided to close the only school in Squire Town to build a new one located in the more affluent community indicated that the education of those students was of higher value for the school board members.

Similarly, in Esperanza Town, the decision to terminate the superintendent’s contract left the mothers in despair and was indicative of the class and language borders enacted by the school board. Betty voiced the mothers’ concerns by stating:

We finally had a good administrator who was doing good things for the school district. He is the first and only one who has made us welcome when we go to the district office. He has an open-door policy, and we feel welcome to come in anytime. We were able to communicate with him in Spanish, and he understood our needs because he grew up in the community. If the board does not continue his contract, they will bring someone who is just going to mess everything up for us and will not do the right things for our children’s education. (personal communication with Dr. Manzo, March 2015)

The mothers in Esperanza Town also explained that they felt the board was ignoring their demands or not providing an explanation because the board knew they did not speak English and had no way of finding the resources to act on the board’s decision. The example above raises issues of discrimination based on language. More specifically, the school board enacted a linguistic border for the mothers by ignoring their demands for being monolingual Spanish speakers.

In both communities, the school boards’ decisions and the interactions between school board members and farmworker mothers demonstrated the education officials’ lack of accountability toward the farmworking communities. The school board members’ actions reflected stereotypes educators often have about “deficit” capacities and skills of Latinos/as in general (Yosso 2006) and in particular children of farmworking mothers. The decision to close the school without regard for the children, or without informing the mothers about the decision to not renew the superintendent’s contract, also reveals how farmworking mothers are treated as devalued members of schools and society, having no input in their children’s education.

Mothers as Agents of Change

The farmworker mothers at both Squire Town and Esperanza Town used their weekly gathering and *platicas* (dialogues) to examine their realities as border crossers and outsiders in the US and at the school sites. These practices aimed to create a sense of belonging. By activating their civic capacity, the farmworker mothers became empowered and more confident as they learned about each other and themselves. The farmworker women did not act as “victims” of inequality, but rather they recognized they had some strengths and skills; and in this process, they sought out researchers as allies to help them facilitate discussions about social justice in schools and the community.

For example, the Grupo de Mujeres in Squire Town decided that the best way to raise awareness about the inequalities that their community faced was to have several photo exhibits throughout the region, with an accompanying narrative that explained in detail

the dealings and decisions of the school board. They decided that in that narrative they would explain how they understood the process, how they disagreed with the decisions and the reasons given by the school district officials, and in particular, how they had tried to advocate for their children's education.

After selecting some thirty-five to fifty photographs, the children and mothers in Squire Town wrote the *testimonios* (captions) that would accompany the chosen black and white photos. The captions were then transcribed, and in a planning and organizing meeting they read them out loud. This process gave them an opportunity to edit the fototestimonio exhibit, making several changes before the collective testimonio was finalized. Like concerned citizens mobilizing in their community, the farmworkers spent weeks creating a list of people to invite to the eight fototestimonio exhibits scheduled for the fall of 2009 and winter of 2010. They invited local policymakers, their family members, and the greater community at large in hopes that the exhibit would raise awareness concerning the educational struggle they faced (Deeb-Sossa and Moreno 2016).

In the exhibit, in addition to illustrating their educational issues they raised intersectional concerns about: (1) the lack of affordable housing and substandard living conditions for farmworkers in the local labor camps; (2) the lack of an affordable local grocery store where families could buy milk, fruits, and vegetables; (3) the increasing gang activity by local youth, without healthy and structured extracurricular activities; and (4) the need for a community childcare center and education opportunities for adults. Together, these issues were expressed in the fototestimonios exhibited throughout Northern California's Sacramento Valley. Their action to highlight their experience with the school board demonstrates how the mothers continued to enact their civic capacity to raise awareness in the community. More specifically, they took responsibility to inform others about their struggles in the community and became active advocates who found innovative ways to raise awareness.

Likewise, in Esperanza Town, the mothers decided that the best way to create awareness and hold the school board accountable was by organizing community forums to become informed about the superintendent search process and by leading a recall for four school board members. Through these actions the mothers exemplified their collective capacity to become active advocates for their children's education and active participants of the educational decision-making process. Through the community forums in April of 2015, the mothers invited other parents to come and meet with the consulting firm hired by the board to ask questions about the process. After a couple of meetings with the consulting firm, the mothers decided that in order to ensure the best candidate was chosen for the superintendent position they needed to form a superintendent search committee. The superintendent search committee was formed with help from Dr. Manzo. The search committee was comprised of mothers, community members, teachers, and school board members. The search committee met several times from April to June of 2015 to discuss the candidates' qualifications, write the job description, narrow down the list of potential candidates, and interview candidates.

In addition, during the time of the search for the new superintendent, the mothers in Esperanza Town were also active in leading the recall efforts from April through November of 2015. They worked closely with a community organization to inform community members about the recall process. The mothers held booths at the local open market to provide information and register community members to vote. During that time, the mothers also met with potential school board candidates to inform them about their vision and goals for the school district. After six months of campaigning and organizing, the recall was successful, and the four board members were voted out. Since

then, the mothers have continued to work closely with the new school board members, the superintendent, and the city manager to bring additional resources to the community. For example, the mothers organized English classes in the community and are in the process of establishing computer literacy classes. The above examples demonstrate how the mothers transcended the borders enacted by the deficit practices of the school district; in turn, they became active participants of the decision-making process by holding the school board accountable and taking responsibility to raise awareness and inform others about their rights as parents.

Discussion

The literature on family engagement and school partnerships continues to expand by exploring ways that more culturally sensitive approaches to parent involvement could be implemented in the schools (Ishimaru 2014; Warnick 2014). Proposing a conceptual model to engage parents as active participants of the educational decision-making process calls for school stakeholders and researchers to shift the lens from a deficit perspective and acknowledge parents' culture, knowledge as parents, and goals for their children's education (Ishimaru 2014; Mediratta et al. 2009; Warnick 2014; Warren 2005). This approach frames parents as collaborators and as knowledgeable resources who can help improve the educational system. Our study provides insights on how deficit perspectives from the local school boards attempted to limit the participation of mothers in the school system. Nonetheless, through the borderlands and civic capacity frameworks, we examined how mothers were able to navigate through the barriers (borders) created by the school boards to seek out support and resources within their community. Furthermore, the mother's actions exemplify how they became politically active and were successful in bringing additional educational resources to the community.

As demonstrated by mothers' actions in both communities, they perceived education as a venue to provide opportunities for their children. For Latina/o farmworker and immigrant communities, the quality of education has determined the opportunities available and their degree of participation in schools and society (Darder et al. 1997). The majority, if not all, of the Latina mothers in this study believed that their children would benefit from going to college, which prompted their concerns over the educational inequalities and barriers they faced. Thus, they activated their civic capacity to challenge the inequalities and create educational opportunities for their children. The examples of how the mothers in this study challenge the inequalities and created change in their community provide a paradigm for more inclusive models of parent engagement that frames parents as collaborators in the decision-making process.

The Latina mothers in both sites noted the importance of their children's education, stating that "education will give them [children] peace of mind. I mean, it will hopefully give them a job that will enable them not to live paycheck-to-paycheck and give them some benefits" (Julieta, interview with Dr. Deeb-Sossa, 2010). The mothers' desire for their children to obtain an education is tied to the work of Gerardo López, which exemplifies that they saw their hard work as a motivator for their children to learn that they needed to value and excel in their education in order to avoid the inequalities farmworkers encountered (López 2001). However, the barriers created by the school boards presented a sense of urgency for the mothers to activate their funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992) and their civic capacity (Stone 2001). This finding is similar to Olmedo (2003) where the mothers activated their agency through their cultural knowledge and values. Similarly, our finding aligns with Dyrness (2011), who found that the mothers sensed they were perceived

as the “least powerful actors” (4) in the local school reform but turned around that deficit view by creating their own counterspace where they strategized and organized.

In both sites, the mothers found ways to facilitate the creation of supportive spaces for each other in order to challenge the inequalities they faced. *Confianza* (trust) (Dyrness 2011) and *comadrazgo* (comradery) are especially important when facing personal plights, family disruptions, and community challenges. Similar to the mothers described by Dyrness (2011), the social spaces created through the regular group meetings in Squire Town, and the workshops in Esperanza Town, the mothers in this study began to share with one another the barriers and struggles they experienced with the school system. Furthermore, the spaces facilitated the activation of their civic capacity by connecting them with other members from the community who can assist them in finding information about their rights as parents. As a result, they activated their civic capacity and began to work together in order to resist the barriers presented by the school board. The work to challenge the school boards created *unidad* (unity) which fostered *confianza*. Without this *unidad* and *confianza*, we contend, the mothers would not have been able to discuss and challenge the deficit practices enacted by the school boards.

The *confianza* fostered by the mothers also helped reconceptualize their gender role from mothers who advocate for their children’s education to their role as activists in the community. The work of the mothers in both Squire Town and Esperanza Town helped to mobilize their resources and demonstrated their political involvement, and defied gender, class, and race stereotypes of Latina immigrant mothers in education. Rather, they use their identity as *mujeres migrantes* (migrant women) as a strength and vehicle for political activism. More specifically, as Pardo (1998) has documented, the Latina mothers’ activism demonstrates how the women transform their role as “mother” into roles of agents of change in their community.

The transition from “mothers” to “agents of change in the community” was facilitated by the access to resources such as information provided by the researchers. More specifically, the role of the mothers as agents of change within their community and the school system was validated and supported by public feminist scholars, as well as other community members and organizations. Together these factors contributed to the empowerment of the mothers to challenge the school boards in their community. As public feminist scholars, we acknowledge our role in the community and recognize that the lessons learned in the communities emerged from a multidirectional approach in which we collaborated with the mothers and community organizations to learn about the issues faced by the community and find ways to resolve them. We are conscious of the community knowledge and assets; thus, our role is to acknowledge and validate these and bring in additional resources to the community. Our public feminist engagement with the mothers has allowed for the *confianza* with the researchers to emerge. As exemplified in our study, the mothers often times called upon the authors to ask for their guidance and feedback on the issues they were facing.

Conclusion and Implications

As part of the growing field of family engagement and school partnerships, this study contributes to our knowledge of the potential to engage parents in collaborations between school boards and community partnerships. Furthermore, our study provides evidence on how deficit approaches to engagement, particularly those by school boards, can create barriers for mothers to become involved in their children’s education. Nonetheless, through a community-based approach, community organizations and researchers can

help create more equitable relationships between schools and communities. While community and research partnerships are not the ultimate solution to solve the complex challenges that exist in rural schools, the engaged-research and assets-based approach employed in this study exemplifies how community organizations, schools, and researchers can leverage resources to foster family engagement and raise awareness to address educational inequalities.

Our work presents practical implications for school districts in Latino/a communities. More specifically, our work provides examples of how school districts can engage mothers in active parent involvement initiatives in schools. For example, school districts can provide the space for mothers to come together and discuss the issues they face in the school system. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of the mothers' funds of knowledge presents an implication for school administrators and policymakers to develop more culturally relevant practices and engagement initiatives. As exemplified in our findings, mothers in both communities were very successful in leading community-wide efforts and engaging other parents. If school districts were more conscious about involving mothers and their funds of knowledge in the decision-making process and in the development of initiatives, the overall engagement of community members and parents would increase and have more positive outcomes. Our work exemplifies the power of the mothers' mobilization in the face of school board politics. The examples of the mothers challenging the school board serves as a lesson for school districts that seek to disempower mothers or that do not acknowledge the mothers' assets and desire for better opportunities for their children. Therefore, school districts need to be mindful of the ways they engage—or not—mothers from disadvantaged communities.

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1. Name used for the regular meetings with the mothers in Squire Town and Dr. Deeb-Sossa.

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