

Well, if I know what my rights are as a parent to educate my children, I am going to use that power to be vigilant about what is happening around my children and inform the others about what they must do to guide their children. I can always be in communication with the teachers to be able to evolve the power and rights, and always be vigilant about what is going on. When there is something that is not right, it must be heard, so that what has happened doesn't happen again...Power means that one has the decision to be able to do something positive, do something different. I have the information, the will, and the support to be able to take what appears bad and transform it into something good. Then I have the power to say, "This is bad, but we are going to fight to make it different."

—Raquel

## NUESTRAS VIVENCIAS: Chicana Parental Caring in Schools

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*Using a Chicana feminist theoretical framework, the article interprets the vivencias (lived experiences) and activities of Mexican American parent leaders in two urban elementary schools. It draws on individual and group interviews as well as field observations to examine Chicana parental caring, consciousness, and morality in these parent leaders as they act to improve their children's education; motivated by concerns about racism, parent rights, and the need to balance family and leadership, and grounded in shared experiences of oppression based on gender, race, social class, and immigration status. The article also offers a critique of white, privileged caring, its ahistoricism, and its lack of attention to systemic racism. It calls on school leaders and policy makers to develop and sustain institutional structures, resources, and policies that support education and mentoring for parents. [Key words: caring theory, feminist theory, Chicana studies, morality, parent involvement, parent leadership]*

Raquel, a Chicana parent leader, describes a state of vigilance about the state of affairs in the schools—of awareness about the meaning of power and transformative action. She calls for openness about things that are not right so they may be corrected and for telling parents so they may take action to guide their children. Her voice, stance, and perceptions reflect an empowered person, a leader, an activist. They introduce us to the idea of Chicana parental caring in the schools. The parent leaders, whose narratives are featured here, challenged the marginalization of Chicana/o children and adults by seeking to empower parents with knowledge about the schooling system and parental rights. They fought for respect of the language and culture of Chicana/o children even as the State of California and public schools enacted racist policies such as the 1998 English for the Children Initiative (proposition 227). The parent leaders also grappled with how to maintain working relationships with the teachers and administrators who had power over the education of their children.

The mothers describe an awakening in the schools, an awareness about racism, about the poor schooling of their children, about the marginalization of parents, and about the oppression in their own lives. These processes are examples of what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as “*el arrebato*...rupture, fragmentation, an ending, a beginning” (2002, 546). The mothers’ lives as school parent leaders reflect a deepened *conocimiento* (awareness) that links “inner reflection and vision—the mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, and subtle bodily awareness—with social, political action and lived experiences to generate subversive knowledges” (542). Anzaldúa explains the forces that shape *conocimiento*—the movement from *el arrebato* (the snatching), to chaos and breakdown, to making sense and constructing new meanings, testing those new meanings, and, finally, developing compassionate

strategies (543–45). To be able to act in a truly compassionate manner for children in the schools, the mothers struggled with themselves, with each other, with me, with teachers and administrators, and with their feelings of inadequacy and disempowerment.

This article describes the meaning of *conocimiento* and its relationship to caring and morality. The space of caring and *conocimiento* is slippery (Russell y Rodriguez 2007); it is fraught with contention, with pain, and with anguish about how to conduct ourselves in a complex world. I will interweave parent leaders' narratives, descriptions of their activities, and relevant research to describe Chicana parental caring in education. I will also take a critical look at how the discourse of privileged white caring tends to ignore important issues such as the influence of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy on the lives of women of color and whites alike.

### **Background on Caring Theory**

Theories of care have emerged as ways to question or challenge gender conventions and supposedly universal male theories of justice. Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking work *In a Different Voice* (1982), in essence, outlined a theory of different moral development for men and women. Gilligan questioned why those applying Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development consistently placed women in a lower stage than men. According to Gilligan, women's morality, rooted mainly in an ethic of care, was concerned with how to respond to others in a way that avoids harm and maintains relationships and was focused on others rather than the self; whereas male conceptions of morality were based on justice rooted in Eurocentric theories of enlightenment and rationality (Kohlberg 1981; Maihofer 1998; Raphael 2001; Rawls 1971). Thus Andrea Maihofer notes how the conventional Eurocentric view presumes that humans are independent individuals and "moral dilemmas are primarily

conflicts between competing demands and rights" (1998, 384). Since Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, a large body of literature has emerged on the notion of caring (Clement 1996; Gilligan, Taylor, and Sullivan 1995; Hamington 2004; Held 1995; Noddings 1985, 2002b; Slote 2007) and specifically on caring in education (Beck 1992; Noddings 1988, 2002a).

In her thought-provoking critique of the "colorblindness" in the discourse on both psychological caring and on caring in education, Audrey Thompson articulates how caring in education would look from the perspective of African American women (1998). This article will also challenge the universalist themes of the privileged white caring discourse, but from the perspective of Chicana working-class mothers engaged in struggles over their children's education.

The key to understanding the distinction between privileged white caring and Chicana parental caring is to grasp how colonialism, suffused with racism, pervades virtually every aspect of the Western discourse on caring. In her powerful book *Red Pedagogy*, Sandy Grande shows how white women actively participate in the U.S. colonial project and how their notions of white supremacy and colonialism continue to oppress all Native Americans (2004, 124). Uma Narayan identifies the "self-serving collaboration between elements of colonial rights discourse and care discourse" (1995, 133). She finds that the colonized were infantilized and made to feel dependent on the paternalistic colonizer for guidance and rule and, further, that the colonizing project was presented as being in the best interests of the colonized (133). In education settings, privileged teacher candidates lacking in social-political awareness see their mission as "saving" inferior others (students of color). This attitude is also more generally reflected in the discourse on caring in education, which fails to address systemic forms of racism and economic oppression. Instead, we are told that a teacher's good will and caring will transform the most unruly

and uncivilized students of color. In this system, the teacher “becomes the embodied agent of the colonial, white, racist society and schooling system attempting to teach the uncivilized persons of color how to become better by becoming like middle-class white people” (Furumoto 2008a, 84).

Moral sentimentalism, with its emphasis on benevolence, is echoed in the privileged white caring discourse—the way to teach students morality in the schools, we are told repeatedly, is through a feminized Christian love of humanity (see Noddings 1988, 2002a). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with teaching motivated by religious ideals, there is a great deal wrong with turning a blind eye to systemic racism and inequality in the schools, as many teachers and administrators have. Nor should we forget that Christian ideals were invoked by the Spaniards to justify the murder of Native peoples, the plunder of their resources and humanity, and the theft of the Americas through colonization (Castañeda 1993; Stannard 1992). Chicana/o children were subjected to Americanizing campaigns that included personal hygiene inspections, suppression of their native language and the classification of disproportionate numbers of Chicana/o children as “retarded” (San Miguel and Valencia 1998). Americanization and colonization are still at work in schools across the United States through the legislated dismantling of bilingual/bicultural education (Mora 2002) and in the “deficit” view of Chicana/o children and their families (Valencia 1997; Valencia and Solórzano 1997). Nathalia Jaramillo and Peter McLaren discuss the sources of resistance to such erasure:

We are compelled to reflect on dimensions of social life that bring into central focus the liminal or border zones of identity, voice, agency, and resistance that can also recuperate the spiritual, temporal, and physical realms that have been forcibly erased through an ethnocentric colonialist perspective. (2008, 196)

The vivencias (lived experiences) presented here illuminate the zones where resistance and critical agency confront structural barriers in capitalist schooling institutions. We get a feel for how these tensions are expressed in real life and what they mean to the participants. We can discern with greater clarity both the possibilities and the limits of caring, resistance, and critical agency in schools. In effect, we can face the reality of our concrete conditions while maintaining the attitude of resistance and the desire to live, to love, and to fight.

### **Activist Researcher Role**

Shaken to the core, I have come to live, breathe, and understand caring and oppositional agency in ways I could not have known before my research. Walking on an earthen pathway lined with trees, slowly and deliberately feeling every step, touching the mother earth, delivering sorrow and pain, *llanto*, and asking for healing and insight—this is the beginning of every day, the beginning of a struggle to make sense of a life turned upside down. Faced with my mother's terminal illness, my daughter's wedding, and the meltdown of my marriage, I have come to question, examine, and reinterpret every aspect of my being as a woman, scholar, and activist with new eyes and a new heart. As Anzaldúa writes, each "*arrebatada* (snatching) turns your world upside down and cracks the walls of your reality, resulting in a great sense of loss, grief, emptiness, leaving behind dreams, hopes, and goals" (Anzaldúa 2002, 546–47). These recent events have propelled me into the continuous cycle of *conocimiento* necessary to be fully alive in this world.

My early political awakening occurred as an eleven-year-old during the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles. I watched on television as buildings burned and African American people engaged in an uprising to protest racism, poverty, and other inequalities. Living in a sweltering housing project at the time, I realized that I was also a poor person of color. From that moment of awareness,

I decided that my life would be about making a better world for poor people. In high school, I became involved in supporting the farmworkers' boycott of grapes, the movement against the Vietnam War, and community-based collectives working on meeting people's basic needs. I have been a community activist for some thirty-five years, a bilingual teacher, a project director, and more recently, a professor and scholar.

My interest in Chicana parental caring came first from my experiences as an elementary bilingual classroom teacher working with the mostly immigrant Chicana mothers of my students. I was impressed by their energy, commitment, and drive to help their children. The parents and I worked together on small projects such as helping children take books home to read and starting an after-school parent literacy class. In 1993, I requested and received funding for a mathematics project for my elementary school and two others. As director, I included parent involvement and teacher training in the project; I worked with Chicana parent leaders and other supportive teachers and administrators to improve children's academic achievement in mathematics and to transform the schools by inviting Chicana/o parents to be more actively involved in the education of their children. I continue to work collectively with Chicana parent leaders to educate parents and families. Our field of struggle has widened to address the war in Iraq, militarism in the schools, and anti-immigrant hysteria. We are *compañeras* in a struggle to create better schools and a better world for our children.

### **The Parent Leaders and the Word**

I can think of no better way to explain the Chicana parent leaders' struggles to improve the education of their children than to use their actual words—their *vivencias*. And just as their *vivencias* name and problematize the world (Freire 2005), so the activities of these parent leaders in the schools represent their

concrete ethics (Morrow and Torres 2002). In short, my methods and analysis are grounded in the personal narratives of women. Chicana/Latina feminist scholars have reconceptualized the varied lives, teachings, wisdom, and spiritualities of Chicanas/Mexicanas as “pedagogies” and forms of knowledge production practiced within the home and alternate spaces (Bernal 2001; Elenes 2001; Galván 2001). The work of these scholars and the present essay provide theoretical frameworks for the practice of critical pedagogy as well as much-needed concrete examples.

Using selected narratives collected through individual in-depth and group interviews, I describe the activities of nine Chicana school parent leaders—Petra, Gloria, Esperanza, Ana, Sra. Garcia, and Isabela from Helena Street School and Genevieve, Citlaly, and Raquel (all pseudonyms) from Lomita Elementary School. I conducted these interviews in 2000 as part of a qualitative research study to better understand how the women saw their lives as school parent leaders. As project director, I had the opportunity to work and plan together with the parent leaders and to observe and participate in almost all of their educational activities with other parents and children in both school and community-based settings, as well as their political activities outside the schools. During these activities, I took field notes and tape-recorded various meetings and sessions, as appropriate.

The nine parent leaders were selected for their many years of leadership in developing and implementing parent involvement programs in the local area schools. During the period of the study, six of the women worked part-time (three hours a day) as paid parent representatives in positions funded by a federal grant addressing whole-school reform. Another two, one from each school site, worked for the schools as part-time (also three hours a day) parent center coordinators. One of the women was a volunteer. Most study



participants ranged from thirty-seven to forty-three years of age, with one woman aged sixty-six. All of the women were working-class naturalized citizens originally from Mexico, with the exception of one woman born in the United States. Five of the women had completed no more than six grades of elementary school; the other four had completed high school and some training beyond high school (as an accountant or as a preschool teacher). Of this group of high school graduates, one had completed her AA degree and was continuing work on her BA; another was attending community college. Eight of the nine women were homeowners, and all were married to men who held stable jobs, except for one woman, whose husband was retired. All of the women had children or grandchildren attending the public schools.

Their schools (study sites) were located in a large urban district in Southern California. Both schools were racially segregated, with at least 97 percent Latino students. The two sites were overcrowded, multitrack, year-round schools. In 2000, Lomita Elementary had 900 students, of whom 68 percent were Spanish-speaking English language learners (ELLs); Helena Street School had 1,200 students, of whom 78 percent were Spanish-speaking ELLs. As an indication of the high level of poverty in the community, at least 93 percent of the children qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

The parent leaders' caring in education reflected their insights as immigrant parents with children in the schools and as women of color that had experienced various forms of oppression. Chicana parental caring in education reflects both a critical, politicized consciousness (*conocimiento*) of the various forms of systemic oppression operating in the schools and an awareness of the need to balance caring in education and familial responsibilities. A parent's involvement is active and pragmatic in resisting oppression and fighting for social justice and high-quality education for their children.

### Chicana Caring Rooted in Oppression

In drawing the broad contours of this particular type of Chicana caring in schools, we need to pay attention to several key issues. First, our social class consciousness has a definite influence on the *ways* we choose to care and *what* we care about. The influence of social class on caring is well illustrated in Gabriela González's essay "Carolina Munguía and Emma Tenayuca" (2003), which contrasts the work of a female benevolent organization led by Carolina Munguía with that of labor leader and Texas Communist Party Chair Emma Tenayuca. Both women had a vision of helping their communities, but they went about it in very different ways. Raised as a Methodist, Munguía was a middle-class, Mexican-born naturalized U.S. citizen, married with children, who engaged in "community activities designed to uplift less fortunate Mexican-origin women through a dual strategy of cultural redemption and female benevolence" (González 2003, 204). According to Munguía's daughter, her mother did not believe in "banging on doors" to achieve goals (208). In contrast, native-born Emma Tenayuca's formative political experiences were shaped by the Great Depression and political activism (209). According to Tenayuca's niece, Sharyll Soto Tenayuca, her aunt "participated in the Finck Cigar Strike mainly for social justice and humanitarian reasons" (211). Tenayuca chose to identify with her dark-skinned father because he was ostracized by some members of the family for being "pure Indian" (209). We can see how the identification of these two Chicana leaders with particular social class concerns influenced the issues they addressed and the ways in which they expressed concern for their communities.

Within the field of Chicana/Latina Studies, a growing number of scholars have examined the histories, lives, and activism of working-class Chicanas (Martinez 1998; Medina 2004; Pardo 1998; Ruiz 1998; Soldatenko 2000). Mary Pardo's *Mexican American Women Activists* (1998) examines the activism of a group of contemporary Mexican American women in Los Angeles. Vicki Ruiz's

*From Out of the Shadows* (1998) documents the history and organizing of twentieth-century working-class Chicanas in the United States. Lara Medina, in her book *Las Hermanas* (2004), looks at how a Chicana/Latina feminist Catholic organization engaged the church and the community in issues such as gender oppression, sexuality, and moral authority. Maria Soldatenko captures the activism of Latina garment workers in her article "Organizing Latina Garment Workers in Los Angeles" (2000). Elizabeth Martinez, writing in *De Colores Means All of Us* (1998), traces Chicanas' involvement in and contributions to larger social movements in the United States. The work of these scholars points to the complexity and diversity of Chicana working-class activism and agency. The present work adds to this field by describing how working-class Chicana mothers demonstrate oppositional moral agency and caring as they fight for their children's education.

Nel Noddings argues in *Women and Evil* (1989, 109), that Marxist feminists have embraced a "consciousness of oppression" that demonstrates an "inevitable narrowing of human *being* that occurs in Marxist thought." Noddings then proceeds to make fun of feminists who characterize cooking and sex as women's oppression in the household, a focus that reflects her limited understanding of oppression in the lives of women, especially women of color. Bill Puka points out how the women in Gilligan's studies seemed to be "coping with oppression and especially sexism rather than more general coping with moral issues" (1990, 67). The parent leaders' *vivencias* featured here strongly suggest that issues of morality are crystallized under conditions of oppression such as sexism, inequalities in the schools, and anti-immigrant raids in Latina/o neighborhoods.

All of the parent leaders reported how they had resisted abuse, injustice, and oppression as children and young adults. Far from passively accepting their

own victimization or that of others, several of them had actively, and often persistently, resisted female subjugation. Learning was a form of resistance to ignorance and the proscribed view of women as not needing an education to be mothers and wives. Esperanza demonstrated both resistance and persistence when she secretly traveled to a neighboring town to get an education.

We fought, hidden from my father and under the watchful eyes of our neighbors, because they would watch us leave the house. Maybe they didn't approve that we were getting an education and we were women....I was 11 years old when I finished elementary school and it took me about a year and a half before I entered secretary school....I was going for about eight months before my father figured out what I was doing.

Genevieve, the only member of the study born in the United States, worked as a farmworker as a young person. She witnessed the callous behavior of growers; owners who called in immigration officers to raid the fields for undocumented immigrants right before payday. Her anger at the growers encouraged her activism in the farmworkers' union.

I remember that we would work all week and then on Friday we would be all excited about getting paid. The owners would call in the "migra" and they would surround the fields to catch those of us that were here illegally. I remember that everyone that was illegal would scatter and try to run away. In this way the owners didn't have to pay for all that work. I would just stand there and get very angry at the injustice. I decided that I wanted to be an immigration officer so that I could let all my family and friends into this country. That is why I support the farmworkers' union. This is why I always try

to help others...I supported the cause and I got involved with the farmworkers' union. I would help in the pickets and demonstrations.

Genevieve became involved in a political and social movement in response to the injustices she witnessed in the fields. Her moral outrage and her ethic of care spurred her to fight and to engage in social activism.

Diana Tietjens Meyers proposes that one way to make sense of women's oppositional moral agency is to seek its roots in Marxist materialist as well as postmodernist concepts (1998, 377). A central issue in this regard is whether the forces shaping oppositional moral agency are "material, discursive, or both" (377). The challenge, then, is for women to consider how to critique and resist the social forces that shape them (377). Although I believe that the work and activities of the parent leaders examined here are consistent with oppositional moral agency, in choosing to use the term "caring" in this essay, I have expanded its meaning to include a politicized consciousness about the world. In his book *Embodied Care*, Maurice Hamington also uses an expanded notion of caring, to describe how the writings and activism of Jane Addams, founder of the Chicago Hull House, demonstrate a conceptual framework and practices for a "social-political philosophy of caring" (2004, 93).

### **Antiracist Caring in Schools**

Audrey Thompson notes how "pre-social innocence" is a white social ideal that serves to obfuscate engaging with issues such as racism (1998, 530–31). "Most of the research generated by white theorists of care," she asserts, "has worked within a framework limited by the theorist's own distinctive cultural and class assumptions and by information from largely white, middle- and upper-middle-class respondents" (531). Limitations rooted in culture and social class are also evident among significant numbers of teachers and teacher candidates, both

white and of color. Choosing to be colorblind in their classrooms is one way in which these limitations are expressed. In critical white studies, we learn how white teacher candidates' limited view of racialization fails to address the deeper and systemic manifestations of whiteness, white privilege, racism, and power (Applebaum 2005; Cross 2005; Lipsitz 2005; Marx 2004). For Chicana/o children, these attitudes manifest as English-only instruction that ignores, distorts, or marginalizes their history, lived experiences, culture, and language.

Chicana caring in education as practiced by the parent leaders was characterized by awareness of racism, linguicism, and anti-immigrant sentiments in schools in contrast to the narrative of colorblindness and racial innocence evident in the privileged white caring discourse. In the following vivencia, Gloria, one of the parent leaders, talks about the evolution of her antiracist mentality:

Now that a lot of time has passed and that we have studied more about this, I have opened my eyes a lot. I have discovered that racism does exist, even though it could be said that, before, I had been a victim of discrimination in some way, but I had not identified it as racism. For that reason, many people don't recognize that they are victims of racism. They say, "No, it was for this reason," or they justify it in some way. When you study and you understand the roots of the problems, you realize that we are victims of racism. We see the problem with different eyes, but, at the same time, we realize we have to do something so that you don't continue to be a victim of racism. Also, when you learn all these things, you feel obligated to investigate further.

Gloria expresses her process of *conocimiento*—of moving from not recognizing discrimination to opening her eyes to it, of knowing, of

recognizing not only victimization, but also the responsibility to “do something so that you don’t continue to be a victim of racism.” There is an active pragmatic component to Gloria’s morality and compassion. She cares about racism and wants to do something.

### **Antiracist Practices**

There is a certain grittiness to Chicana caring in education. By this I mean that the mothers were never satisfied simply to learn about something. Their knowing about the world resulted in their engaging in action and reflection to change the concrete world. The women’s antiracist consciousness and activities grew out of their life experiences as immigrant women of color, and later from their involvement in multicultural training designed for teachers and school staff. One of my concerns as project director was how to transform the school culture to be more accepting of the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of students and families and to encourage parents and school personnel to become allies in creating an antiracist school environment. In order to achieve this, I started to involve teachers and staff in multicultural training. The parent leaders were also invited to these training sessions and I asked them for their opinions. They immediately expressed an interest in developing a parent multicultural training program that was tailored to the needs of immigrant Latina/o parents. Gloria voiced why she felt that parents needed their own multicultural training:

I think the idea surfaced because when we attend workshops that are designed especially for teachers, it is not the same. Almost all the curriculum is directed towards activities that teachers can do with kids....It’s not exactly the same as a class that is destined for parents because parents have different problems. And sometimes the problems we have are with the teachers. Many things are the same

such as that we have to learn to treat each other well....But what happens when we need help to discipline our children directly? Or what happens when we need help with a teacher that is mistreating our children?...It wasn't just my idea. It was the idea of the majority of parents that were participants.

Over an eight-month period, the women leaders met to determine the goals and objectives of the *culturally specific* Parent Multicultural Institute (PMI) program and to develop the activities they would use.<sup>1</sup> With support from myself, resource teachers, project directors, and an external consultant on multicultural training, the parent leaders designed a five-day PMI program (1) to incorporate and reflect the values and culture of Latina/o parents; (2) to educate parents on how to help their children grow up with positive racial attitudes; (3) to help parents develop understanding and communication skills for supporting their children's academic and social development; and (4) to promote respect for human diversity.

The PMI program activities were facilitated by the Chicana parent leaders and engaged participants in a wide variety of interactive and individual activities including cultural circles, role-playing, writing and sharing poetry and letters, literature-based activities, films, and games. The PMI program was unique in that it was a culturally specific parent education program designed by Chicana parent leaders to address issues of race, class, and gender with mostly immigrant Latina/o parents. Approximately thirty parents from the two schools attended the PMI program each year from 1999 to 2001. In subsequent years, the PMI program was expanded to include parents from other local area schools. In a recent study examining the impact of the PMI program, participants reported an increased sense of empowerment in addressing racism and oppression and in supporting their children's academic



and social development (Furumoto 2007) The parent leaders' activities to counter racism demonstrate how caring in schools can move from an apolitical, ahistorical colorblind caring to an empowered and aware form of compassion and activism.

### **Enacting a Politicized Compassion in the Schools**

Lynn G. Beck critiques the "political model" of schooling and asserts that power in schools is a "limitless phenomenon" that can be "exponentially increased by the educative process" and through the application of caring (1992, 485). She dismisses a "radical ethic" as inadequate because it (1) emphasizes the "overthrow of existing structures"; (2) has an "incomplete view of power"; and (3) "is useful only in certain situations" that "have little to say about the conduct of the many interactions in the day-to-day life of schools" (484). In Beck's view, a caring ethic that lacks a political view of power relations in schools better facilitates administrators' focus on organizational challenges. Her view reflects a privileged white sense of caring in which those with greater power don't need to acknowledge schools as contested sites that produce inequity, domination, or the abuse of power. Genevieve describes some of the power dynamics in her school:

A lot of times you go against the people that employ you, but at the same time, if you don't believe in what you're doing or what you stand for, you don't belong in that position....Another reason why I stayed in this role as parent center director for nine years was because we were experiencing a process of school reform....At the time, it was teachers and principals on top and everyone else on the bottom. So with the new reform it was very hard for teachers to accept parents as equal stakeholders in this situation. I was in a meeting. I was new. I tried to represent the parents to the best of my knowledge....I was

in a room with a classified representative, my principal, the district's reform representative, and Sally, the teacher representative to the union—all these big old people, and me as the parent representative. I told the teacher representative to the union, "We're all equal stakeholders here. We all have the same voice. We all have access to the same information. We're all part of the decision-making process." She told me, "Well, I cannot look at you as my equal because you don't have the education I have."

Genevieve's narrative demonstrates how a parent leader experiences the power hierarchy in schools—teachers and principals on top and everyone else below them. Even though Genevieve talks about the egalitarian ideal of equal stakeholders, the teacher tries to silence her by invoking the teacher's superior academic preparation.

Gloria, another one of the parent leaders, describes some of the limits and possibilities of parental power in the schools:

Even if we have parent rights, the majority of parents are not informed about their rights. More importantly, parents feel intimidated about coming to talk to the teacher or to step into the school. There are many reasons. One of them could be the language, another is that the teacher doesn't always give the parent good treatment, and they don't make the parents feel comfortable in the school. For that reason, the fear continues to grow and parents learn even less about their rights. It is a vicious cycle because if they feel intimidated, they don't come, and if they don't come, they will hardly be able to learn about all the rights that they have.

In this powerful statement, Gloria captures the essence of the cycle of alienation as experienced by parents in poor and working-class schools. By creating an unwelcome environment, schools are effectively able to shut parents out of the school and limit their opportunities for learning about their rights and responsibilities for their children's education. It is a political and unequal environment for which Beck's caring ethic cannot account.

In the next narrative, Genevieve describes not receiving support from the school principal. At the time of the interview, she had already been informed by the school principal that her position as parent center director would not be renewed. Genevieve expresses what she believes she has accomplished:

I don't feel it's a community school anymore. It's more of a lockdown. It's more like a prison. It's more like "I'm the boss and you're going to do as I say." Everything is on the straight and narrow. He, the school principal, wants you to do what you need to do, but don't ask for support. Don't ask for any help. Just do it. Sometimes it makes it very hard. As a parent person myself, like, there's a lot of stuff I don't know. Yet I would love to go to him and say, "I need help on this." I would feel comfortable doing that if he would say, "Come on Genevieve, let's sit down and try to figure it out." I don't feel it's there. I think the principal has a lot to do with the way the school runs itself and the way the people feel. I don't feel that the parents are happy there. That's why the parent involvement has even gotten less. My health has suffered because of the principal. The doctor already found me with diabetes, which I didn't have, and high blood pressure, which I didn't have. I have an ulcer. That's what it is. It's just so much crap. I'm just tired of it. My husband says, "You have to think about you. If you like working with the kids, then you stay there. You do

what you can for those kids. Let somebody else take hold of the parents. I think you've done your share." I think I have. The parents are set. They are empowered...Now if it gets taken away, it's because the new parent center directors allowed it. Parents fight for what is theirs. That's theirs and they know it...As a parent leader, you need to make parents feel that you have that—the power to do. If you have a [namby-pamby] in there for a parent leader, well, then, the people are going to walk all over you.

In Genevieve's narrative, we see how her sense of agency about changing the school confronts the institutional power of the principal. Both her physical and mental health were compromised as Genevieve fought to keep a parent center and to maintain parent representation in the school. She did not feel supported by the principal and instead saw the school community as a place of repression—"lockdown" and "like a prison." Genevieve's experiences demonstrate the limitations experienced by school parent leaders when they push against the dominant administrative power. Despite Genevieve's agency, the principal was still able to remove her from her position as parent center leader. Parent leaders and parents had little or no say in the selection of teachers and administrators, the content and delivery of curriculum, or the manner in which their children's learning would be measured.

In spite of these barriers, the parent leaders insisted that they and other parents needed to know their rights as parents of schoolchildren. In response to the parent leaders' requests, I contacted representatives of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) to see if they could help the parents learn about their rights. Fortuitously, MALDEF was looking for parent leaders to pilot a parent leadership and political action training module; the nine women of my study were trained to be trainers themselves in the thirty-

six-hour MALDEF Parent Leadership Program. Each year between 2001 and 2005, they provided MALDEF Parent Leadership training to groups of twenty or more parents in their schools, informing them about their rights and responsibilities regarding their children's education.

### **Collective Social Action**

The women leaders in my study engaged in a wide range of activities that reflected their compassion, fighting spirit, and their determination to improve schooling for their children. Their collective actions in the schools were very much like the "concrete action" that has been the mainstay of Chicana activists throughout the United States. In her illuminating portrayal of Mexican women in twentieth century America, Vicki Ruiz notes:

In examining women's activism, I am struck by the threads of continuity, the intertwining of community, family, and self. For some women, their involvement remains couched in familial ideology while others articulate feelings of personal empowerment or contextualize their actions within a framework of community-based feminism. Whether or not they proclaim feminist identities, their actions privilege collective politics over personal politics. (1998, 145)

During the 1998 California state election, eight of the nine women in my study were directly involved in the struggle against proposition 227, the English for the Children Initiative, sponsored by Ron Unz.<sup>2</sup> This initiative was the third in a trilogy of California propositions that had an impact on Chicana/o students' access to equal educational opportunities in the state (San Miguel and Valencia 1998).

The parent leaders educated other parents to vote against the initiative, raised money to fight the initiative, precinct-walked, phone-banked, and

attended demonstrations and City Hall meetings. The women were tirelessly committed to their struggle. During this time, they opened their homes for political meetings and organizing. They cooked food and passed out flyers. They involved their husbands and family members in demonstrations and fundraising. The women reached out through the local Catholic church to inform others about the initiative. As noted by Guadalupe San Miguel and Richard R. Valencia, Mexican Americans have been involved in a protracted struggle over the education of their children since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1998). The women leaders' activities are part of the ongoing collective struggle for equitable education.

Although proposition 227 passed, the women leaders continued their struggle by educating parents of children in the two schools about their right to sign waiver forms to allow their children to participate in the bilingual program. Parents of English language learners (ELLs) in Helena Street School continued to sign waivers through 2001 for their children to participate in the bilingual program. In June 2001, out of a total of 1,200 students, 1,000 students were ELLs. Of these students, 840 were on signed waivers to the bilingual program, representing a participation rate of 84 percent.

### **Navigating the Demands of Family and Leadership**

It is important to acknowledge the challenges women leaders face as they try to balance their leadership roles in the schools and their family responsibilities. Understanding how they deal with these competing demands provides insight into their ethics as mothers and school parent leaders. Of her decision to leave her community college studies to support her daughters' education, Citlaly said simply, "My daughters are more important than I am." Genevieve turned down a promising job as a parent consultant with the university so that she could take care of her grandchild and allow her daughter to go to college. In

their actions, we see the constant struggle to balance concerns for family with concerns for community or for self-improvement; we also see their willingness to sacrifice their own advancement for the good of their daughters and family.

Critics of care-based moral agency point out that it is rooted in self-sacrificial altruism, which Diana Tietjens Meyers argues, has played a “historic role in women’s subordination and cooptation” (1998, 376). Indeed for Chicanas and other Latinas, self-sacrifice has often been a significant aspect of our socialization process. Anna NietoGomez notes that Chicana self-sacrifice and suffering are rooted in the colonial period (1490–1821) in Mexico, during which the Catholic Church shaped the psyche of the Mexican woman through the ever-present veneration of the Virgin Mary (*marianismo*) (1997, 48). This veneration “defined the woman’s identity as a virgin, as a saintly mother, as a wife-sex object, as a martyr” (NietoGomez 1997, 49). After the overthrow of the Spanish colonialists, Mexico’s dictator, Porfirio Díaz (1877–1911) promoted female domesticity and the role of the Mexican woman as a primary transmitter of the new nation-state’s cultural values (González 2003, 223). During this period privileged women could get an education for the purpose of serving their nation in circumscribed ways, such as in the interests of children. This brief history points to some of the roots of the conflicting roles and responsibilities assumed by Mexican women that continue to influence Chicanas’ agency and activism in the United States.

The women featured in this essay described their efforts to educate parents about their rights so they could address problems with the education of their children in the schools. As noted in her vivencia addressing school power, Genevieve’s role as a parent center leader seemed to threaten her health and created significant tensions in her home. As a member of the school reform team, she was on the front lines confronting and working with teachers and

administrators. Her narrative comments reflect her marginalized status vis-à-vis teachers who did not always see her as an equal. In a group interview, she described the familial tensions that resulted from her efforts to help others:

We have had a lot of fights in the family due to helping other people. My children have told me, "You like the school more than us, or you give more time to the school than to us." And that is a very difficult battle for women...in a position of leadership. And even though we want to do the best for the whole world, we also have to think of our families. And that is also something that, how do you say, struggle. It isn't so much the money because they don't pay us enough. But it is what we want to accomplish.

Genevieve captures the commitment of the women leaders when she says that "we want to do the best for the whole world" and speaks of "what we want to accomplish." She also captures the frustration of competing forces with her use of the word "struggle" to describe how she felt about managing her time with school leadership and her family.

Oppositional agency for women of color is not the individualized, idealized, heroic phenomenon we might have construed it to be. Rather, it is much more like a *collective cultural capital* focused on addressing issues in their community (Furumoto 2008b). From my observations of the parent leaders in these two schools, it seemed clear that their oppositional agency was activated, embedded, and negotiated within a web of social relationships. The women leaders tended to work in collectivist ways through school and community-based social networks that served to amplify their knowledge about the school system. They socialized and exchanged information with other parents in the community at the parent centers of the two schools and in parties and other social functions.



These social spaces and interactions helped to cement their connections to each other. These connections in turn resulted in many students benefiting from knowledge (collective cultural capital) held by even one member of the social network (Furumoto 2008b). The women's social networks had similarities to Mexican women's immigrant kin networks described by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994). Parent leader Citlaly indicated how family- and friendship-based social networks facilitated her permanent settlement in the United States. Latino households are often connected to other households and institutions through diverse social networks (Amanti, González, and Moll 2005; Amanti et al. 1992; Delgado-Gaitan 2001). The women leaders of Lomita and Helena Elementary Schools were bound together by mutual respect, affection, and concern for each other, and, more importantly, by their deep commitment to fight collectively for social justice for their children and to make a difference in the world.

Clear demarcations of the mother's role in the Chicana/Mexicana family emerged from their discussions about the tensions between leadership and family responsibilities. Here we see them not as weak or marginalized but as actively engaged in negotiating the competing demands of leadership and family while remaining true to their ethic of family first. The choices made by the parent leaders are consistent with the views articulated by Elizabeth Martinez in her book *De Colores Means All of Us* (1998, 183), where she describes the role of the mother in the colonized family:

The family is also seen differently by women from the colonial experience. It often serves as a fortress, a defense against the inimical forces of the dominant society, a source of strength for a people whose identity is constantly under attack. Within that fortress, the woman as mother remains central. She is the principle of life, of survival and endurance.

However, returning to Gilligan's concept of the prominence of relationships in women's sense of morality, we can clearly see that the mujeres placed their daughters' future advancement and education before their own. The primary relationship to be maintained was that of the family and, in particular, the children's survival and advancement came before that of the mother.

### **Conclusion**

The power of parent leaders' vivencias is in their very concreteness, their example, and their illustration of Chicana consciousness, compassion, and sense of justice. These vivencias document Chicana oppression, hope, survival, and the struggle to create humanizing spaces in the schools. We come to see Chicana parents' humanity, vulnerabilities, and powers of agency. The framework presented here for examining Chicana parental caring in schools adds to the field of Chicana feminist critical analysis and to the scholarship addressing Chicana working-class experiences (Hernandez 2006). It also expands the discourse on caring to consider the ahistoricism, colorblindness, universalizing, and lack of examination of underlying systems of oppression that are still prevalent in the field.

The parent leaders' vivencias challenge us to think critically and thoughtfully about institutionalized oppression in our schools and about how we might confront it. Their struggles suggest the need for a broad-based community and political organizing effort to challenge oppressive school policies and practices. Teachers, administrators, and school policy makers need to *see*, *hear*, and *respond* to how Chicana/o parents experience and process the schools' institutionalized power and practices of domination. To break down the institutionalized oppression operating in schools means to expose and dismantle the foundations of colonial, racist, and hegemonic schooling. It means to open our eyes and see what is morally outrageous about schooling

that fails to educate Chicana/o, Latina/o, and other children of color and that fails to recognize the humanity and potential of all parents to support their children's academic and social advancement.

### Acknowledgments

I laugh to keep from crying when I think about everything that happened on the way to completing this article: my mom's second broken bone and hospitalization, fires, evacuation, and on and on. I acknowledge and thank the mujeres of the 2005 MALCS Writing Workshop who provided the initial feedback, consejos, and support for this essay: Mariela Nuñez-Janes, Adriana P. Nieto, and Marivel T. Danielson. The space created by MALCS was truly a Chicana feminist editorial space for reflection, sharing, and growth. The editorial process pushed me to grapple with ideas, to sharpen my thinking and to descend into my own space of *conocimiento* through each iteration of this essay. *Mil gracias del profundo de mi corazon* to these amazing scholars and editors.

<sup>1</sup> See Gorman and Balter (1997) for use of the term "culturally specific."

<sup>2</sup> The English for the Children Initiative, now state law, requires all instruction to be in English unless parents come to the school and request a waiver allowing their children to participate in a bilingual or dual language immersion program.

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