

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**Community, Connections, and Trust:**  
Parental Social Capital in Brighton Park's Community Schools



By  
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## Abstract

Community schools have emerged as a popular strategy nationwide to offer shared leadership and expanded services to students and communities. In Chicago, this reform has been adapted as a means of redressing disinvestment from neighborhood schools, offering increased funding and expanded programming through partner agencies. While research into the outcomes of such initiatives is ongoing, this study addresses how these schools are shaping the lives of parents and community members beyond their direct implications for youth. Through Bourdieu's social capital framework, this study uses an ethnographic and parent-centered lens to focus on community schools in Brighton Park, a neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago, revealing how these schools cultivate pro-social norms and rich networks of trust within and around the schools, and the importance of these practices on the social capital available to parents and local communities.

By integrating discussions of social capital theory with emerging literature on community schools, this research interrogates the role of community schools in modifying patterns of inequality through social capital networks. This paper argues that Brighton Park's community schools, by creating community- and parent-oriented spaces for socialization as well as social service administration, create and cultivate informal parental networks that can lead them to key resources. Furthermore, for Brighton Park's predominantly Hispanic population, many of whom are migrants, community schools offer new avenues into bureaucratic spaces of school leadership, providing connections and resources necessary to influence school decision-making across parental engagement styles as *networkers*, *skill-builders*, and *socializers*.

**Keywords:** *Community Schools; Social Capital; Neighborhood Nonprofit; Trust; Chicago*

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## **I. Introduction**

The American education system wrestles with ingrained systemic inequities, where students' success often depends more on their circumstances than objective merit. While schools offer potential for leveling economic disparities (Downey 2020), the practical outcomes can reveal stark inequalities along racial, class, and gender lines. These disparities echo within schools: students of color face harsher discipline, barred from advanced coursework due to racist tracking (Lewis & Diamond 2015); wealthier students receive preferential treatment from teachers early on (Calarco 2018); narratives favoring white students perpetuate advantages in schools (Warikoo 2022); and affluent families use connections to adeptly navigate college admissions, compounding educational advantages (Stevens 2009). These disparities, stemming from institutionalized racism and classism, aren't passive; they are perpetuated through unequal resource distribution, including disparities in social capital – the resources accessible through social relationships. Education, deemed a great equalizer by some (Downey 2020), is all too often deeply shaped by these inequities. While schooling is standardized, its quality hinges on available resources – dictated by neighborhoods' environmental conditions, affecting school attendance and funding, and impacting opportunities within schools.

Resource inequality in the US is not just an issue in schools – there are also significant disparities in healthcare, employment opportunities, and social services among the communities surrounding these schools. These inequalities are compounded by racial, class, and neighborhood factors, multiplying disadvantage for marginalized communities (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn 2000). Social capital plays a crucial role in mediating these disparities, particularly in communities with low trust and low pro-social norms with institutions and each other or with few resources and avenues of support accessible through their networks and relationships (*Ibid.*).

As a result, these individuals lack the same ability to leverage connections for job opportunities, educational support, and access to vital services in ways that are common for upper-class communities. Thus, fostering social capital in underserved communities is essential for reducing resource inequality and promoting social mobility in communities, which has further benefits for the students who live in these communities (Duncan & Murnane 2014). Initiatives that build and strengthen social networks, such as community-based nonprofit organizations and community school models, can provide critical pathways for individuals to access the resources they need.

One solution that has emerged that shows particular promise for the cultivation of social capital for both youth and their parents is the community school model. A rapidly-growing style of public school reform, community schools prioritize the formation of connections – the starting point for the development of social capital. Furthermore, the introduction of lead partner agencies, often nonprofits with extensive resources and connections of their own that coordinate community schools, means that these community schools have extensive resources to offer, and their administration is supported by the deep connections that the school creates. This model has been used in the US to target the marginalized communities and youth most affected by resource inequality, directly addressing the decreased social capital available to them. The support for this model continues to grow – Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson has shown emphatic support for it, announcing he hopes to expand from the current 20 Sustainable Community Schools in CPS to 200 schools (Koumpilova 2023). Additionally, a federal investment of \$94 million was recently committed to support the expansion of community schools in 16 districts across Illinois in the next 5 years (Bessler 2023). As the model expands, understanding the implementation of community schools and how, why, and for whom their social capital networks succeed is crucial to their successful implementation in Chicago, in Illinois, and across the US.

In this paper, I argue that Brighton Park’s community schools – by fostering an environment that promotes collaborative norms and practices and deep networks of trust built with programming – expand the resources available to parents and community members through social capital networks, but in ways that are limited by shifting institutional norms and guidelines that parents must navigate. To do so, I will first explain the theory of social capital and its application in the school literature. I will then address the history of the community school model and its aims, as well as the ways in which it impacts social capital. This will be followed by an explanation of my methodology and approach to the study. I will then detail my threefold questions – *who* is most involved in these social capital networks, *how* do their engagement styles differ (as *socializers*, *skill-builders*, and *networkers*), and *what* rewards do they reap from these various engagement styles. I will present a bricolage of ethnographic evidence that the community schools’ parent programming cultivated relationships with other parents, with the local community-based nonprofit, and with the school in ways that may not have been possible for many of the parents, transforming their lives by facilitating their social capital development.

## **II. Social Capital in Schools**

### *Theoretical Background*

Social capital theory, developed over the past 40 years within the social sciences, seeks to explain the correlation between an individual’s resources and their social networks. Initially introduced by Bourdieu (1986) as part of his discourse on various forms of capital, this concept significantly influenced sociological discussions on resource inequality and class reproduction. Bourdieu’s works, rooted in historical materialism, define capital as a means to empower individuals to convert social energy into labor (1986, 280). Capital, in this context, encompasses

more than *economic capital* or monetary wealth; it includes *cultural capital* (class-based behaviors and symbols) and *social capital* (potential resources from social connections), shedding light on the unspoken power systems within society (Bourdieu 1986). Social capital, within this theory, comprises an individual's social relationships and the resources available through these connections (Bourdieu 1986; Portes 1998). Importantly, these resources aren't solely economic; they can manifest as cultural capital or additional social capital as well (Bourdieu 1986), serving as a multiplier by significantly amplifying available resources.

While Bourdieu's framework forms the basis of the theory, various social capital theories diverge, while still emphasizing the importance of resources embedded in connections as a key feature. In contrast with Bourdieu's individualistic emphasis of social capital as an investment, Coleman (1988) underscored instead the Durkheimian collective maintenance of obligations, norms, and information which constituted a group's social capital. These auxiliary aspects of social capital affect the efficacy of social capital networks, governing whether and how social relationships can be utilized to gain resources. Lin (1999) attempted to merge these ideas, emphasizing individual pursuits of social capital while acknowledging circumstances where groups unite to represent collective interests. However, Lin's continued emphasis on purposive and rational action as the driving force or the formation of social capital ignores the importance of environmental curation by organizations, as well as the degree to which social connections bearing resources are unintentionally formed (Small 2009, 4). The *curation* of social capital by organizations, whereby resource-rich organizations and individuals are intentionally brought into contact with individuals so that they can be called upon later, is particularly important for working-class families who may lack existing resource-rich social networks and the time and knowledge necessary to cultivate these relationships themselves.

My thesis will treat social capital as the resources accessible through social relationships (whether formed purposely or nonpurposely), governed by various norms, particularly those imposed by organizations. I thus build upon the evolving scholarly discourse on parental social capital, focusing specifically on community schools as pivotal settings for its development and subsequent impact on youth outcomes. While social capital is recognized as crucial for youth development in broader academia (Morrow 1999), recent work delves into how it functions within diverse school structures (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000; Portes 1998; Mayger & Hochbein 2020; Payne 1997). Bridging this theoretical framework with literature on parental involvement and trust, my thesis examines how social capital operates within specific contexts and how school leadership structures influence this process using community schools as a lens.

### *Social Capital and Race*

Social capital has been used to argue for a general decline in American community – but this view of social capital is predicated on the insularity of networks and consolidation of advantage necessary for maintaining unequal opportunity. It's crucial to recognize that social capital, historically mediated by discriminatory institutions, has perpetuated the exclusion of minorities outside of school settings (Bedolla 2007). These institutions include parent-teacher associations (PTAs), historically associated with whiteness and femininity, as well as homeowners' associations (HOAs), both of which have exhibited racial gatekeeping and inequality, whether intentional or unintentional, by consolidating individuals into networks with high social, cultural, and economic capital (Bedolla 2007; Caldas & Cornigans 2015; McDonald & Day 2010). Furthermore, as insular White Christian communities have declined post-Civil Rights era (including decreases in HOA/PTA participation), there's been a perceived decline in social capital across American communities (Bedolla 2007). However, this decline primarily

reflects the degradation of formal networks of racialized opportunity, highlighting the ongoing racialized cultivation and valuation of social capital as a means of preserving this stratified opportunity.

Scholars have proposed several reasons for how historical exclusion and discrimination have influenced the modern differential cultivation and valuation of social capital along ethnoracial lines. Inequalities may persist due to low cross-racial trust, particularly among lower-class individuals (Gaddis 2012), or fewer family ties to influential institutions based on race and class (Stanton-Salzar & Dornbusch 1995), underscoring the importance of institutions intentionally including these groups in their networks of information and resources. Institutions may also exhibit a mismatch between *habitus* and *field*, where institutional rules and norms in a given setting do not value the forms of social capital certain groups possess, creating barriers that prevent access to resources for those not familiar with the norms. Consequently, institutions may adopt a cultural deficit lens, assuming that groups not engaged in ways legible to the dominant cultural repertoire lack the desire to be involved at all (Perna & Titus 2005). This lens is inevitably informed by the historical context of race in the US, rooted in chattel slavery, which significantly influences how institutional relationships are framed and navigated, posing a barrier to the cultivation and activation of social capital for marginalized ethnoracial groups. This historical context in which racial inequality is interpreted, fueled by unequal access to institutional information networks through continued consolidation of social capital by race, creates the continued conditions for differential access to and use of social capital.

While scholars of social capital have shown how it has been used to exclude ethnoracial groups from opportunity, community schools offer an opportunity for social capital to be organized in a manner that provides benefits to these disadvantaged communities through

non-profit support. Nonprofits, as organizations subject to scarce funding and privatized models, are at risk of reinforcing existing ideas of responsibility and personal uplift (Dunning 2022).

However, these nonprofits are also able to come in and ease the burdens of social capital cultivation and activation through the *curation* of community spaces and resource networks that remove the ethnoracial and socioeconomic barriers that prevent upward mobility. Much like a country club or a PTA might serve as a social space for privileged white parents to network and consolidate advantage, so can community school programming offer a vast network of resources to those who need it most by bringing the connections and resources that nonprofits possess into parent and community spaces. Because some parents routinely participate in community school programming, perhaps even for the entirety of their day, the community school becomes crucial to understanding how many parents and community members in the neighborhood develop and maintain their social capital networks, offering new resources for those who need them most.

### *Social Capital and the School*

Schools implement programs that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, wield significant influence on the social capital of families engaged with the school, some of which are formalized. One such institutionalized example of social capital is the PTA/PTO, functioning as a link between parents and teachers, offering a platform to air school policy concerns and serving as a fundraising body to ensure adequate school funding. Putnam (2000), for instance, focuses extensively on the impact of the PTA on social capital and, consequently, educational outcomes. His work, which emphasizes the decline of social capital networks in America, views decreasing PTA involvement as indicative of reduced community and family engagement at a national level (Putnam 2000, 326-327). Putnam's attention primarily centers on state-level indicators of social capital and metrics like trust and reciprocal norms that determine the probability of networks

generating resources and significant group affiliations. However, these disparities often manifest at the school level, presenting schools as potential sites for altering broader community social capital networks. Consequently, reforming structures such as the PTA remains pivotal in influencing social capital networks within families, whether through institutionalized entities or other informal setups with profound impacts within schools.

For populations with marginalized class and racial identities, social capital networks often exclude schools, but authentic, trusting connections within the institution and with school staff can lead to important interventions in student social capital. Stanton-Salazar (2001) observes that social capital has become increasingly stratified in the school, acting as a multiplier of advantage for the privileged within class reproduction systems (Bourdieu 1986). Nonetheless, while marginalized youth generally have limited social capital access and fewer crucial resources for upward mobility, Stanton-Salazar notes that counselors can forge relationships with youth that provide them with needed emotional and institutional support. Forming connections with counselors or other school agents becomes a rich source of social capital by providing connections to individuals with intimate knowledge of the available resources and supports within the school. Where deep trust and supportive norms were established, tangible change occurred, rendering social capital accessible to previously disconnected youths. It's imperative to note that this wasn't uniformly implemented within the school structure — not only was the school inadequately staffed to foster such connections, but the circumstances facilitating these connections were largely random and not reliant on learned help-seeking strategies as with other student groups. This text offers hope for the counterstratification of social capital on the student level, suggesting the importance of deep connections which could be expanded and institutionalized.



School reform movements offer insights into how the institutionalization of trusting social relationships, coupled with effective school leadership, serves as a nuanced tool in youth support. One such movement is the Comer school reform, which aims to strengthen staff connections and align curricula across classrooms, fostering a communal and unified school approach (Payne 1997). This reform was implemented in the Chicago context, where schools operate at a highly localized level through Local Schools Councils (LSC). LSCs, composed of parents, community members, students, and staff, wield significant power, with power over decisions such as the hiring and firing of principals. While this democratic structure allows for increased community voice, Payne (1997) observes that it actually led to the failure of the Comer reform in some schools – while the Comer reform sought to establish stronger staff connections and unify the school, its success hinged on whether staff and LSC members had genuine trust in school leadership and whether school leaders exhibited care for staff and the community. While the reform sought to establish stronger relationships, its success hinged on the norms that scaffolded these relationships – affecting their social capital. In contrast, Catholic schools, where parental influence over administration was limited, research has shown that social capital can be vastly increased, particularly due to shared in-group norms that strengthen social networks (Coleman 1988). This emphasizes the importance of norms and trust for effective social capital in school-community relationships – if schools and communities do not trust one another and their leadership, they are not able to effectively leverage resources to support youth.

In addition to reform movements such as the Comer reform, other models for public schools have grown in popularity, such as the community schools model, which addresses social capital deficits on a community level rather than on the individual student level. This model, unlike the Comer reform which focuses on restructuring within the school, involves partnership

with external partner organizations to provide the extended activities and supports and to coordinate family engagement and leadership. These connections are vast and can be built into the school building, as with one school studied by Mayger & Hochbein (2020) which partnered with 40 organizations and not only held events such as education on renters' rights, but also had a full-time health clinic housed on its lower level. While community schools have a wealth of resources and connections, results of community school implementation are mixed and highly rooted in how parental social capital is attended to when developing networks of trust in and around the school, as with the Comer reform.

The community school model represents a radical form of community leadership, empowering families to take a lead role, not just a supporting one, in school affairs as part of a strategy to involve parents in community social capital networks. Mayger and Hochbein (2020) identify this parent-centered leadership as the crucial difference between the community school and traditional public schools. As with Payne's (1997) description of the Comer reform's limitations in the case of individualistic manipulation of social capital within the Local School Council and inadequate school leadership, successful community schools hinge not solely on parent leadership but on levels of trust measured through norms such as respect, care, and competence (Mayger & Hochbein 2020). Furthermore, Mayger & Hochbein (2020) observed that one school that experienced chronically high staff turnover (particularly in the principal position) was unable to form strong connections of trust, and therefore took five years to successfully implement the model. However, in the two other schools, the authors identify that the development of strong relational bonds is key to their success and their ability to quickly and effectively implement the model. This reaffirms that effectiveness depends heavily on the quality of relationships, particularly trust in designated leaders such as the principal. This underscores

that ultimately, the efficacy of school structures in supporting social capital lies in relationship quality and trust in school leadership.

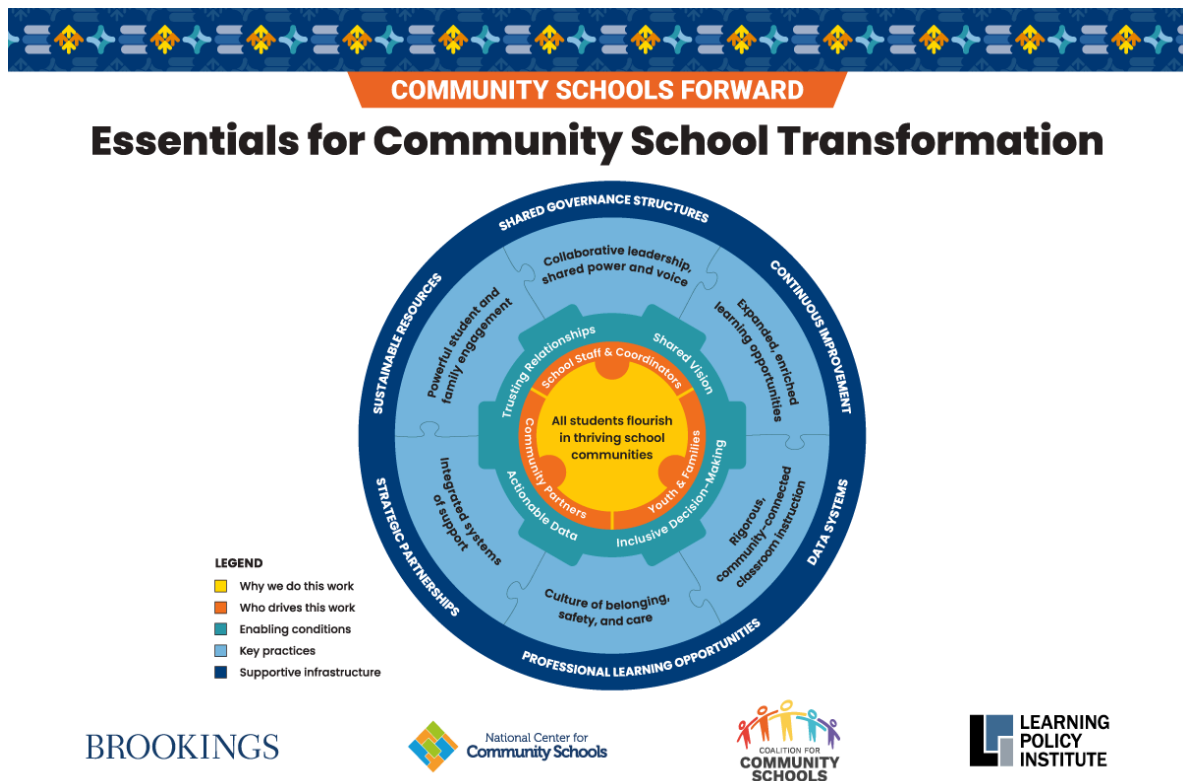
In the existing social capital literature on community schools, while Mayger & Hochbein (2020) offer an invaluable longitudinal account of internal operations of community schools, new scholarly work understanding parent perspectives and experiences across diverse demographic groups is crucial. Chen et al. (2016) analyze the parent perspective using survey data to quantify levels of parent involvement longitudinally as a proxy to social capital. However, while this parent-centered approach outlines more clearly the parents' experiences, it still fails to fully analyze how parents understand these experiences or how this involvement varies across demographic groups. Further research on parents' experiences is crucial because marginalized parents are often excluded from existing structures that foster social capital development (Hill & Taylor 2004). To address this gap in the literature, this paper will use qualitative and ethnographic methodologies to understand how parents use the institutional resources of BPNC's community schools to grow their own social capital – addressing who is involved, how they engage, and what benefits they reap.

### **III. Community Schools Model and History**

#### *The Theory and History of the Community School Model*

To understand the workings of community schools, it is important first to understand the overarching model that guides their creation and implementation. *Community school* is a broad term that is used to describe a model of school with an asset-based emphasis on existing community resources and the implementation of collaborative leadership practices, integrated student supports, and expanded learning opportunities (Baxley 2022; see Figure 1). They

integrate health and social services, academics, youth development, and community engagement within the school by partnering with community supports such as community-based organizations, businesses, and government agencies (Goessling et al. 2020). By doing so, they address the academic, physical, and social needs of students within the school setting and empower communities to take on leadership roles, ensuring that schools meet the diverse needs of their students (Holme et al. 2020). Importantly, community schools extend their services beyond traditional school populations – students, families, and educators – to include the broader community, such as local residents and partner organizations (Butler et al. 2022). While the implementation and success of these elements can vary significantly, community schools are united foremost in their commitment to holistically support communities by partnering with various community stakeholders.



*Figure 1: Predominant model of community schools in the US (Learning Policy Institute 2024)*

While community schools broadly aim to engage the entire community within the school space, the United States has specific interests in implementing these programs, focusing on supporting communities with historic disinvestment. In the US, community schools have intentionally been established to target low-income, Black and Brown families and communities with limited existing resources, typically in urban areas (Heers et al. 2016; Baxley 2022; Holme et al. 2020; Goessling et al. 2020). Community schools provide additional funding and resources to these communities identified with greater need, approaching the closure of the achievement gap not by trying to fix “underperforming” schools, but rather by giving *more* resources to disadvantaged school communities (Downey 2020). More than just economic resources, community schools also importantly coordinate social capital networks, facilitating how communities and families connect with each other and with these new resources and supports. Thus, in the US, community schools are not just a model of school structure but a reform that brings in new resources to high-need schools and communities, counteracting historic disinvestment by connecting and investing in local residents, families, school officials, businesses, non-profits, and government agencies through the community school.

The aims of community schools in the US also reflect a continued attention to the importance of coordinating relationships between the school and home, particularly for disadvantaged students. While the effect of the school day on the achievement gap between different class backgrounds has been contested (Downey 2020), the larger portion of the day spent outside of the school has a profound impact on student outcomes. Students, based on their socioeconomic backgrounds, have differential access to enrichment opportunities. For working-class students, their families may have limited ability to support their learning and development outside of the school day due to economic means, knowledge of systems, or

working schedules. By coordinating relationships between the school and home, community schools ensure disadvantaged families are connected to the school and able to support their children outside of the school day – in ways that middle class families are already able to. But importantly, community schools do not just form relationships between the school and home, but also the community – businesses, non-profits, government agencies, neighborhood residents, etc. – creating broader familial and community supports and social capital that can, in turn, support student outcomes (Duncan & Murnane 2014). By connecting these various supports, curating a vast social capital network for parents, students, and community members, community schools reflect a community-oriented approach to the ongoing effort to equalize opportunity outside of the regular school day.

The modern movement of community schools in the US also has a unique political backdrop in opposition to a larger national trend of neoliberal school reform in the '90s, representing a strong commitment to increasing funding and supports in public schools. The neoliberal reforms of the late 20th century focused on efficiency and privatization, often undermining public education by closing public schools in favor of various new charter and private models (Goessling et al. 2020). For example, in Philadelphia, neoliberal reforms such as austerity measures, mass school closures, and charter expansion were introduced as market reforms to improve the school system, while teachers unions were demonized and stripped of power. In response, the education justice movement in Philadelphia supported community schools as an alternative approach to address the oppressive conditions experienced by urban students and marginalized communities in the new charter schools and remaining underfunded public schools, instead advocating for increased funding and power for existing public schools (Goessling et al. 2020; see also Baxley 2022). This case illustrates how community schools have

been used to counteract the negative effects of previous neoliberal reforms and to address long-standing inequalities that result from disinvestment in public schools in marginalized communities. Community schools thus represent not just a reorganization of the school, but an infusion of new funding and resources within public institutions to support economically disadvantaged communities. The unique historical and political context in the US – focused on targeting urban youth, home-school coordination, and funding of public schools – highlights the power of community schools as a reform that prioritizes public institutions, believing that they should play a more active role in people’s lives, even outside of the school day.

Emerging literature on community schools reveal promising results for students, but also emphasize the challenges of sustainability and of effective leadership models. Recent research on community schools reveals significant positive outcomes, including improved parent-school relationships, better school climate and culture, increased student achievement and graduation rates, and improved racial justice practices (Goessling et al. 2020; Butler et al. 2022; Holme et al. 2020). These schools also contribute to the holistic development of youth and broader community engagement and support. However, despite these successes, the literature also highlights substantial challenges in implementing community schools, such as funding difficulties and the complexities of expanding and maintaining these models across different contexts (Holme et al. 2020; Heers et al. 2016; Butler et al. 2022; Daniel et al. 2023). Goessling et al. (2020) noted that top-down approaches and service-provider orientations can limit the transformative potential of community schools by imposing stringent benchmarks and deprioritizing community agency. Ongoing research, such as this thesis, is necessary to better establish how and why these schools work, and for whom – not only looking at the impact it has

had on students, but also on the parents and other community members who are served by the community school.

### *Community Schools in Chicago*

The community schools movement in Chicago has gained traction in recent decades by opposing neoliberal reforms and mobilizing long-standing grassroots efforts for democratic schooling practices and support for public schools. What sets community schools in Chicago apart from the broader national trend is their focus on transforming neighborhood schools to combat *school mobility* and *racial stratification*. In Chicago, the vast array of school choices and varying school qualities has led families to frequently move their children between schools and relocate within the city to access better educational opportunities – a phenomenon called *school mobility* – which is more common in marginalized communities and disrupts student learning (Kerbow et al. 2003). Additionally, Chicago continues to see a significant achievement gap between racial groups in Chicago Public Schools – termed *racial stratification* (*Ibid.*).

Community schools have been named as a solution to these ongoing trends by increasing funding in existing neighborhood schools so that students have local, high-quality schools available to them and by targeting marginalized neighborhoods in a holistic manner that addresses disadvantages outside of the school day in order to decrease the gap in racialized opportunity. This has resulted in a community school implementation pattern similar to the national trend, concentrating on predominantly Black and Brown schools in low-income neighborhoods with high school mobility rates in CPS.

Recently, the community schools movement in Chicago has focused on equitable funding for neighborhood schools alongside their transition to community schools, aligning the two goals politically. Building on previous investments in community schools, CPS committed \$10 million



in 2018 to transform 20 campuses into community schools through the Sustainable Community Schools (SCS) initiative as part of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) contract (Holme et al. 2020). This initiative, seen by Holme et al. (2020) as a first step toward addressing broader stratification of outcomes by race in the district and in the city, also included a resolution by the Board of Education to move away from the public funding of charter school models towards adequate funding for neighborhood schools, an effort aligned with the reduction of between-school mobility as defined by Kerbow et al. (2003), as charters often displaced or replaced existing public schools in marginalized neighborhoods. This is a key aspect of Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson's vision for leveraging community schools to equalize opportunity in Chicago for marginalized racial groups – hoping to expand from the existing 20 Sustainable Community Schools to as many as 200 in CPS (Koumpilova 2023). Due to the recent expansion of community schools through the SCS initiative and their increased prominence in CPS's plans for better-funded and more comprehensive neighborhood schools, ongoing research on the impacts that this model has for families and for communities grows increasingly important as we try to understand how to improve outcomes, for students and for the communities around them.

### *BPNC and Brighton Park's Community Schools*

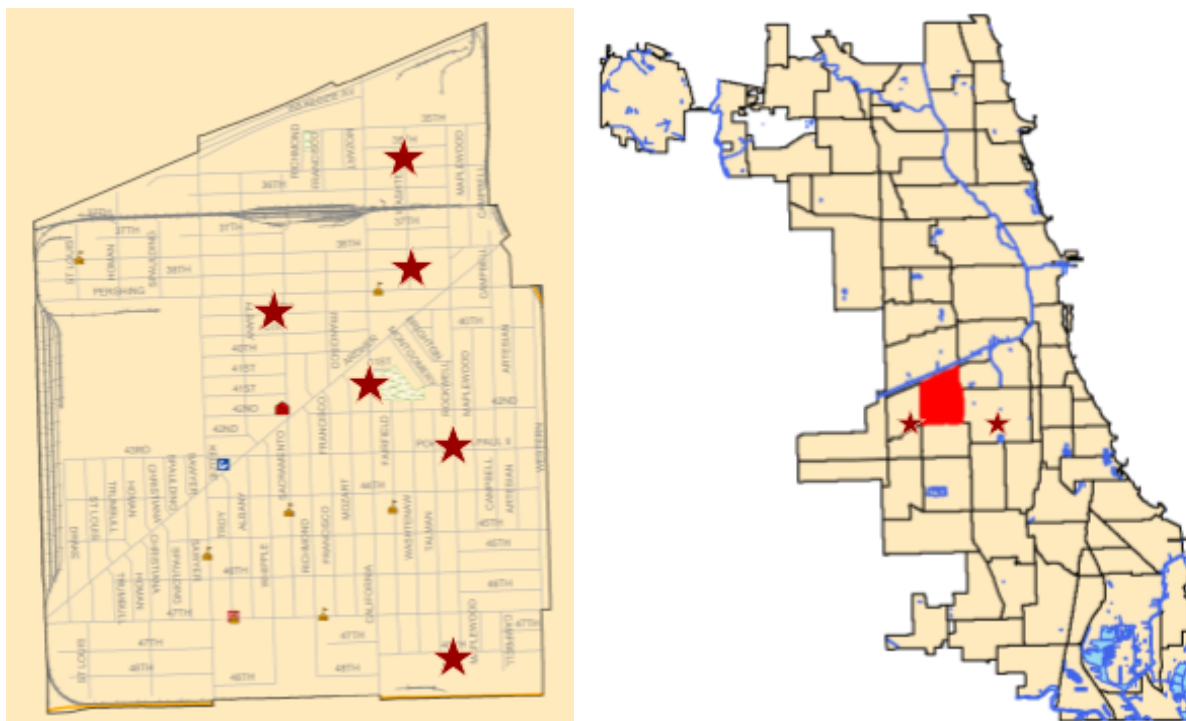
The focus of this research is on the community schools in Brighton Park, a working-class, Latino neighborhood on the Southwest Side of Chicago. Originally settled in the mid-19th century, the neighborhood was working-class in origin, growing alongside the Union Stock Yards and nearby railroad (Chicago Historical Society 2005). While the neighborhood maintains this working-class character today, the demographics have shifted greatly from its early days as a community of European immigrants. The neighborhood is now 80% Hispanic (up from 15% in 1980) and has a growing Asian American population, representing 10% of the neighborhood (up

from 3% in 2000). Over 40% of the neighborhood’s residents are foreign-born, and less than 20% of residents have a postsecondary degree. 71% of residents report speaking Spanish at home and over 40% of residents say they do not speak English “very well” (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning 2024). Because today’s Brighton Park community has a large immigrant, Spanish-speaking, Hispanic, and working-class population, many residents may be new to the country, with no existing connections, and may have difficulty accessing resources due to linguistic and cultural barriers, despite high economic need.

The Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) is the primary organization in Brighton Park that provides support to its many residents, including through community schools. BPNC, according to its website, was founded in 1997 in Brighton Park by community leaders who did not feel represented by elected officials. This organization was founded to win new resources for the community, as well as to provide a grassroots organizing space for the neighborhood’s residents. While it has grown into a larger nonprofit over the years, BPNC maintains a focus on its grassroots objectives and sees itself as representative of and constructed by the Brighton Park community. Among its five issue areas, one is Education Justice – including its focus on implementing community schools, the focus of this paper.

Community schools in Brighton Park are nearly synonymous with neighborhood schools and represent a community-driven approach to support the needs of youth and the community. According to CPS’s Search site data, of the fourteen schools located in Brighton Park, nine are district-run schools. Of these, six are community schools partnered with BPNC – along with two other schools that are part of BPNC’s community schools but are located in nearby neighborhoods (see Image 1). Among the other district-run schools in Brighton Park, some partner with BPNC to provide a subset of community supports to the campuses without full

model implementation. Because of BPNC’s vast reach into most neighborhood schools in the neighborhood through community schools, combined with the organization’s continued emphasis on grassroots and community organizing, BPNC is able to effectively establish norms of trust with the community, improving the quality of school-community relations and the social capital available therein. Through its grassroots origins and continued organizing, BPNC’s community schools represent a crucial space for continued research to see how community schools can be effectively implemented as a strategy of further investment in public neighborhood schooling, both through increased grant funding opportunities and through a commitment to the coordination of school-community relations by a grassroots community-based nonprofit.



**Image 1:** Maroon stars show where in Brighton Park and the surrounding neighborhoods BPNC’s 8 community schools are located (City of Chicago 2015)

The entry point for my research on community schools in Brighton Park is through BPNC, as they are the partner that facilitates many of the parent-oriented supports in Brighton Park’s neighborhood schools. BPNC is the center of an *organizational field* (Small 2009) – a set

of organizations with shared norms and goals – with objectives that span, according to its website, Community Organizing, Community Services, Community Health, and Youth Services. As a result, BPNC is embedded in a vast network of organizations, local businesses, and individuals who are positioned to provide many resources to the predominantly Latino, working class community in Brighton Park. Its community schools not only promote the well-being and learning of students, but also provide important community space for parents and community members to connect, a crucial service in a neighborhood that was found to have the least park space per capita in the city (Chicago Tribune 2011). Because such community gathering spaces are so limited, the ability to form bonds with other community members is also limited, creating conditions for relative isolation and an inability to activate social capital networks with other individuals and organizations. As a result, BPNC’s parent and community programming curates an environment for social capital cultivation and activation that may not otherwise be accessible, connecting the community with each other and with the many additional resources that BPNC and its partners can provide. To capture this impact, this study focuses on community-facing spaces and networks in BPNC’s community schools and adult programming and events held at the neighborhood schools that were open to the public – using these spaces as an initial point from which to inquire about involved parents’ relationships to the community, the school, and BPNC’s organizational resources through the community schools.

#### **IV. Methods**

##### *Recruitment and Data*

To recruit for this study, I provided flyers in both English and Spanish to BPNC employees to be distributed to parents at BPNC programming. These flyers had a QR code and a

link that would take parents to an open-ended qualitative survey that took around 15 minutes to complete, asking them various questions about where they seek resources and support and about their experiences with the community schools. At the conclusion of this survey, respondents had the opportunity to sign up for a 1-hour interview, during which I asked further questions about their experiences and social capital networks. After this interview, participants were compensated with a \$10 gift card of their choice. Because many respondents felt more comfortable using Spanish, I had a Spanish-speaking staff member from BPNC present for interviews upon request to provide interpretation as needed. When this was the case, the interpreter’s translation of the interviewee was used for transcription. In addition to parents, I also spoke to several staff members who I met at programming and conducted interviews with them as well, asking variations of the same questions.

I ultimately had 20 respondents to my survey and 8 respondents who completed interviews. Basic demographic information reported by my survey respondents can be viewed in Table 1.

Gender	Age	Residency	Schools
16 women 4 men	4 are 25-34 8 are 35-44 6 are 45-54 1 is 55-64	4 in BP for less than 1 year 3 in BP for 1-5 years 2 in BP for 5-10 years 10 in BP for 10+ years	1 in Richards HS 2 in Kelly HS 1 in Curie HS 5 in Shields Middle 3 in Shields Elem 1 in Burroughs Elem 2 in Brighton Park Elem 4 in Davis Elem 4 in Other

**Table 1:** *Self-reported demographics of survey respondents*

I employed an ethnographic approach to my research, participating actively in community events and taking field notes, an adapted form of which are included at times in my

discussion. As a result, many informal conversations and experiences also inform this research, including participation in Lotería Night, Earth Day Clean-Up, Fruit Arrangement Making, Report Card Pick-Up, Community Health Fair, and New Homeowner Workshops.

### *Coding and Analysis*

Fieldnotes, survey responses, and cleaned interview transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose after being transcribed in English into an appropriate text format. In this software, 28 *in vivo* codes – or codes that use words or phrases used by interviewees (Elliott 2018) – were developed as I reviewed the transcripts of participants’ observations and statements about their engagement with the community schools and their social capital networks in Brighton Park. An example is “As a mother,” which was applied when mothers discussed their engagement in those terms. Self-reported data from surveys were also linked to respondent’s via Dedoose’s “descriptors.” In a second round of coding, 4 codes were added to capture strategies of support and classify social capital activation as occurring via other parents, BPNC, or the school. These codes were then grouped into parent codes that informed the sections that divide this thesis, and significant and representative quotes were exported from Dedoose to further allow interviewees to speak in their own voice (Elliott 2018).

The ethnographic methods applied to this research were selected because strong qualitative literature on social capital networks in school is able to reflect the actual experiences of communities on an interpersonal level. Large-scale research on social relationships has made broad claims about the transformation of social capital (see Putnam 2000) and quantitative data on how connected people are has shown various changes in social capital metrics (see Coleman 1988). However, this study aims to understand how social capital operates on the individual level, not only by measuring the quantity of relationships and the norms and trust that govern

them, but also to understand the paths that people follow on their way to gaining social capital and the profound impacts that social capital can have in their lives. This thesis does not take social capital to be an *a priori* good to be measured – instead, it will deeply and qualitatively demonstrate the potential that social capital has to transform lives in the context of community schools. As a result, this research was conducted and this thesis is structured in ways that display the interweaving, personal stories of parents in Brighton Park, and the way that community schools impacted their social capital.

In the thesis that follows, while fieldnotes and survey responses are occasionally produced in full, the bulk of the raw data are constituted of verbatim quotes from interviews. In doing this, I hope to represent parents in their own words to the extent possible, allowing them to speak through this thesis and use it as a space where their thoughts and feelings can be heard. While some respondents are anonymized, many asked not to be, and thus were not, in an effort to raise their voices. This thesis takes an individual-level approach to broad theorizations about the impact of community schools and social capital, using raw ethnographic data to address important questions about who benefits from community school supports, how different individuals approach and utilize these supports, and the many benefits that these supports garner for these individuals.

### *Positionality*

I came to this work as someone with hope for the community schools model and with hope for school reform, but with no prior community engagement in Brighton Park. In a prior internship, I had been introduced to the model and to BPNC's work, and quickly became fascinated by the radically community-oriented approach to school reform. As a result, I had inroads in BPNC as an organization, but I lacked community connections and on-the-ground

experience in this field. This proved somewhat challenging, because my study made demands of parents' time, and I did not have existing social capital in this community to draw upon when encouraging parents to participate. Furthermore, as a white man with very limited Spanish abilities, my ability to connect with the Latina mothers who commonly participated in programming required effort from both myself and the parents I studied, and occasionally required an interpreter. Nonetheless, thanks to the engagement and interest of many parents, I was welcomed into this community, and many parents accommodated my linguistic limitations in their interactions to include me. My study is thus from an outsider perspective, and throughout this paper I acknowledge this perspective, as it affected how parents engaged with me as an individual coming to them through BPNC, with some parents even approaching me as a resource of social capital myself as a result of my outsider positionality and organizational affiliations.

#### **V. Identity, Language, and Labor: Who is Involved?**

Not all parents were equally involved in BPNC's community schools programming. Those most involved tended to share particular identity characteristics that made them feel most welcome in BPNC's spaces and gave them the ability to become deeply embedded in the social capital networks that BPNC had to offer. This is by no means a definitive characterization of those involved in the programming, nor is it intended to claim that no people outside of these characteristics were involved in BPNC, the school, or the community, but based on my observations, linguistic-cultural and gender-labor characteristics were significant for those most involved in programs. In the coming section, I will discuss how identity, language, and labor played a role in who could and did seek out BPNC's programming and therefore who was able to



reap the benefits of the social capital networks in these spaces – offering its greatest benefits to Latina stay-at-home mothers.

### *Language and Latinidad*

It was a cool, April evening when I approached Kelly College Prep for Lotería and Food Night. I was at the school only one week prior for report card pick-up, but in all the hustle and bustle of that event, I had hardly talked to a single parent – much less, recruited anyone for my study. As I approached the large yet ornamented brick building, armed with a flyer for Lotería Night as well as my own stack of freshly printed flyers advertising my parent involvement survey, I worried that perhaps no one wanted to speak with me, and that my project was sorely misguided from the start. As I entered the building and proceeded up a staircase, past paper signs emblazoned with English, Spanish, and Mandarin, I noticed an interior vastly different than the exterior constructed a century prior. I passed Chicano murals adorning the walls, into a lunch room filled with more art, and which had been adorned with a large banner decorated with the designs of lotería cards. Latin music played faintly in the background as I introduced myself to the BPNC employees who had organized the event, offering my assistance and stacks of my flyers.

As I proceeded to walk around to the groups of community members who had begun to trickle in to introduce myself and my study, I realized one fact very quickly – Spanish was the language being almost unanimously spoken. I stumbled through my under-rehearsed introductions and limited vocabulary in Spanish, sometimes garnering sympathetic assistance from younger children who had come along with their parents or from eager fellow parents with whom I had already spoken. While this posed a major challenge to my communication, I never felt unwelcome. After speaking with the organizers, many of whom would become invaluable

informants and relationship brokers as time went on, they translated my explanation of my study to the gathered crowd after making announcements of the other upcoming community events, also in Spanish. Thoroughly embarrassed but also filled with a sense of being welcomed, I retreated to the tables of the lunch room where I would play *lotería* and enjoy the mole and *posole* brought by some of the mothers, reminiscing on my own childhood memories of Mexican holiday traditions and occasionally making broken small talk with a small group of mothers seated nearby.



**Image 2:** *One of the murals adorning the walls inside of Kelly College Prep.*

The fact that BPNC’s programming and materials were all offered in Spanish, while an obstacle for my own comprehension, was essential to the organization’s ability to involve Latino parents, making network-building possible in the first place. One survey respondent, when asked what mediated her involvement in programming, responded “that the programs are bilingual and open to the community.” This sentiment was echoed by the staff members who I spoke to as well, both in community-building events but also in other programming such as GED and ESL courses for community members. Language and race play a large role in the lives of Latino communities, a concept consolidated by scholarship into a singular term – *latinidad* (Rosa 2019). While not formally recognized in the US as a single racial category, Latinos experience

marginalization as a non-white Other in American society, an experience that is reflected in major institutions such as the school. As community schools, BPNC's partner schools created spaces where Latino community members could come together and connect without the language barriers commonly experienced in social service agencies and in academic settings.

The use of Spanish in these spaces, in addition to opening up these resources and events to those who would be marginalized in English-speaking settings with greater language policing, allowed for stronger community bonding, creating a sense of home. Research has revealed that even in those with multiple language fluencies, the language spoken has a strong influence on disposition and personality for the speakers – and furthermore on the values they express through linguistic “cultural frame shifts” (Ramírez-Esparza et al. 2006). Many of my interlocutors spoke of feeling at home in Spanish language programming, even when they had high English proficiency, and the fact that events advertised that they would be in Spanish was important for them to even consider attending. This ended up being true in my study as well – having flyers in Spanish and bilingual translation available was crucial for study recruitment, and English proficiency did not necessarily determine the language in which people interviewed. That Spanish language materials and events were available was about far more than comprehensibility – it was crucial for the creation of community and the curation of suitable conditions for the development of resource-rich social capital networks.

The multiple benefits of Spanish language programming and of receptiveness to language needs in the community as community schools did not emerge individually – for many parents, they were all integral and overlapping parts of what made BPNC's community schools a home. This was especially true for Maria, a migrant from Peru, who had moved to Brighton Park with her husband and three children just over a year prior to our interview. Her initial experience with

Richards Career Academy was shaped by its warmth towards Latinos, its language supports (and shortcomings therein), and its home-like feeling of support.

**MARIA:** At Richards [Career Academy], from the first time I went with my daughter, the treatment was very kind, it was very cordial, it helped a lot. *Above all, I was surprised by the treatment given to Hispanics or Latinos*, because there were, I've been to two other schools around here and I hadn't felt the same warmth. It's what both my daughter and I felt like [was] a home. Then when my daughter entered school we received a lot of support. A lot of help. *All the teachers are very cordial, there are teachers who, although they are not bilingual, but they do a lot to make themselves understood to see how to solve it because in my opinion this is a very very serious problem, that not all teachers are bilingual.* It's not that it's bad, but it makes it a little difficult for the children, but at school the teachers came to find ways to solve it.

Maria, while she felt that Richards, limited by its staffing and funding as a public school, was struggling to meet the linguistic needs of her daughter, nonetheless felt supported in her efforts to find solutions. Following this quote, she also talked at length of how much the school supported her daughter as well as her, making them excited to go to the school. Other respondents discussed how their feeling of being at home at the community schools was rooted in both the linguistic welcomingness and the cultural events such as the Lotería Night and in institutional spaces such as the Bilingual Advisory Council (BAC). By helping parents and students to feel at home in the schools, BPNC's community schools laid the groundwork for the formation of resource networks for these families, especially those linguistically, culturally, and racially marginalized.

Linguistic and cultural inclusion in programming was not simply a top-down decision – it was one fueled by community input and established means for providing feedback for community schools. In an interview with Meliza, the Resource Coordinator at Kelly College Prep, she shared how the language offerings for the adult GED courses were decided each year.

**MELIZA:** At least three of our instructors [speak Spanish], no, like four . . . The school year that just ended, we had five adult programs and out of those five, four of our instructors were bilingual. So we would, always we always ask, so *when we're filling out a registration form for our parents or they're filling it out, there is a question that asks the preferred language, just because that also helps us when it comes to hiring that specific instructor*, because unfortunately, there have been times where especially like for the Spanish GED . . . the language

that the class was being offered, it was more so for the parents that are predominantly Latino and only speak Spanish. And so that was something that we did come across and was a barrier when we want a higher involvement. And not everyone could enroll because Spanish wasn't their first language, right, or their native language.

Deciding how many bilingual instructors to hire and whether to offer the GED courses in Spanish was a delicate balancing act – on the one hand, many Latino parents needed these courses in Spanish, but on the other hand, not all community members spoke Spanish or enough Spanish to take these courses. In the end, Meliza discussed how she saw the vast array of similar courses across the community schools as the best solution, allowing parents to choose the courses in the language in which they would be most comfortable. While this is certainly a tension to be managed, by continuously collecting community input, BPNC was able to best respond to community needs, to the extent that hiring made this possible, making these resources more accessible.

The Spanish-language services and programming not only provided direct resources and connections, but played an important role in embedding those with the least established resource networks into resource-rich environments that can provide support to them. This is especially true for migrants, many of whom may know no one outside of their immediate family and may be alienated not only through linguistic barriers, but also through fears of deportation due to immigration status. This has been exacerbated by recent efforts by Republican governors such as Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who have bussed over 40,000 predominantly Latin American migrants to Chicago over the past two years, many of whom have no family or connections in the area (Neveau 2024). Maria, a migrant herself with few existing connections prior to her involvement in BPNC programming, was a beneficiary of this resource-rich social capital network when her asthmatic husband took a turn for the worse. While she had joined Parent University – a CPS program that offers parent workshops at schools across the district – to help

her learn English, it was her casually mentioning her husband's condition to a fellow parent in the class that made all the difference.

**MARIA:** My husband didn't have any type of insurance and [his asthma was] bad exactly two months ago and I didn't know where to turn. I asked someone and they sent me some names of nearby clinics, but when the appointment was scheduled, they were very far away and I didn't know how to get there. My husband felt very bad until *a classmate in my English class told me to talk to Miss María*. She is the coordinator of the Parent University and it hadn't occurred to me because I thought it was purely [for] school issues . . . *They got me the appointment only in 5 days*. What's more, the young lady told me that Miss María had spoken so that since we were low-income, they could give her insurance to check us. It is accessible to be able to pay and to receive a very good service . . . And then there *[Miss María] told me that they were not just there to see issues at the school, but rather it was for this* – to help us in everything that refers to the community in any minimal problem that you have. We are going to support you.

Maria's engagement in Parent University's Spanish language ESL course, and the casual yet welcoming relationships that she had developed therein, embedded her unwittingly in a vast social capital network. Maria, in speaking with a fellow parent about her husband's condition, sprung this pre-arranged network into action, allowing the community school to rapidly connect her to its vast array of resources and connections, ultimately enabling her husband to access critical care. By making spaces culturally and linguistically open and welcoming for Latinos in the community, BPNC curated latent social capital networks and transformed the resources available to parents, as well as the ease with which these resources could be accessed, even unintentionally.

While BPNC took great care to linguistically and culturally include its majority-Latino community members and parents, the same accommodations were not afforded to Brighton Park's Mandarin-speaking and Asian American populations. This was, in large part, a product of the fact that the parent and community programming at community schools was responsive primarily to parents of students, and Asian Americans were in the vast minority in most of Brighton Park's community schools, ranging from 0% to 3% enrollment at the elementary and middle school level according to the US News & World Report in 2024. Elizabeth, the Resource

Coordinator at Brighton Park Elementary discussed the decision to only have English and Spanish language programming.

**ELIZABETH:** So everything that I promote, it has to be in English and Spanish. We do have a very small population who speaks Mandarin. Literally like, I want to say one or two percent. *I have about two families in there who are, who speak Mandarin*, but they're very, they understand, so like if I send that out in English, that helps. *They're not as involved I would say because I have more of a Latino population in there, or Hispanic population.* I don't want to say Hispanic, Latino because I have different backgrounds, especially with the newcomers coming in and stuff. Yeah, but everything's in English and Spanish.

Stephanie, a Mental Health Counselor also based in Brighton Park Elementary, shared similar insight into the community school's engagement with Mandarin-speaking families.

**STEPHANIE:** Unfortunately we do not [have programming in Mandarin]. I know there's been a higher need . . . We do have someone, I'm not sure her title, but she is here and she does speak [Mandarin], so sometimes when we do have students that only speak Mandarin or parents, we're able to use her as a translation . . . Yes, *I would say [we have engagement from Mandarin-speaking families at events]*. I know there are some that were, I've been doing, we have our parent programming through BPNC as well, I did the, you know, the sewing and things like that. They get engaged with that. And yes, since we do have a small population that [are] families [that] speak Mandarin, I do see the child come out and try even to talk to them. They give an effort

In both cases, the interlocutors discuss language being less of a barrier for Asian American families than it is for Latino families, particularly because they tend to have greater English proficiency. Additionally, the programs run by BPNC in the elementary schools tend generally to focus on engaging parents, in contrast to programs run out of high schools, which tend to cater more to non-parent community residents as well. Nonetheless, at Kelly College Prep, a high school with a greater Asian American population (around 10%, according to the US News & World Report in 2024), Meliza describes a strikingly similar situation.

**MELIZA:** *Unfortunately [there is not Mandarin-language programming] for parents, just for students.* So we do have our Chinese cultural club program for students, and that one is sponsored by one of our departments, our counseling department chair. So she speaks Mandarin, she sponsors that club and they learn more about like their language and then like the roots of an Asian American student at a predominantly Latino school. So that's like the only program that we do offer for students . . . *We do send our surveys at the beginning of the school year to ask the students their interests, right, and like, what kind of clubs they would like to have throughout the school year and we do the same to our parents.* We don't only send the survey to the current parents that are enrolled in our programs, but we send it to the entire community . . . And we send that in all three languages.

From the data collected through parent interest forms, which are sent to all parents in all three languages, Meliza did not see requests from Mandarin-speaking parents for a shift in the cultural or linguistic context of events. It is worth noting that all respondents to my survey were Latino, and that I only interacted with one Asian American family at an Earth Day event at Brighton Park Elementary, who did not respond to my survey. Therefore, while it is outside of the scope of my study to speculate the significance of this, it is worth noting that Asian American and Mandarin-speaking parents and community members were largely absent from many of BPNC's resource-rich spaces and were thus excluded from the curated social capital networks located therein.

For Brighton Park's Latino parents, language and culture were integral to their aspirations for themselves and for their children, representing the dimension in which they felt most marginalized in broader society, but also the conditions which invited them into BPNC's "home" and into the social capital networks available in that space. For Maria, her desire to learn English was her initial pursuit that led her to BPNC programming, and the inclusion of bilingual students was her greatest hope for her child. While BPNC supported her pursuits and welcomed her Latina identity, the benefits to her ran far deeper – giving her access to a socially-embedded resource network without her needing to cultivate her social capital network herself. For the many Latino and migrant families in Brighton Park, this support was life-changing. It is important to note that those most involved from my interviews and observations in these spaces with whom I was able to speak identified strongly as Latino, creating, in its own way, cultural and linguistic boundaries around those most embedded in the "home" that BPNC created.



## *Motherhood and Labor*

It's almost half past eight in the morning when I exit my taxi at Davis Elementary and wander my way to what seems like the school's Annex building. Carmen, the head of BPNC's Promotoras de Salud (Health Promoters) had invited me after we had spoken at the Lotería Night at Kelly. The flyer she had passed along read "ARREGLOS DE FRUTA – Invitan, Comite PAC, BPNC y Escuela Davis!" – inviting parents to come for a Parent Advisory Council meeting, followed by the creation of fruit arrangements. As I found my way down the hallway of elementary school students bustling around their classrooms and into the library in the back of the building, I entered a room filled with women of various ages, and one man. People were seated around the room at several tables, one of which seemed to command an air of importance, which I assumed to be those involved in the Parent Advisory Council, and one of which had what seemed to be women dressed as crossing guards, which I would later find out were members of the Parent Patrol. Not sure what to do, I briefly introduced myself to the former table, and then went to sit in an open chair by the Parent Patrol. At their invitation, I grabbed some coffee from the far side of the room, and soon Carmen arrived and sat next to me, easing some of my nerves, even if we had only met once before.

Soon, the PAC meeting got underway, consisting of the reading of the previous minutes and discussion of upcoming events, particularly the upcoming Día del Niño, all done in Spanish. Carmen then introduced me to the group, prompting me to explain my survey, which she then translated into Spanish, helping me to field the questions that arose. After the meeting's conclusion, people huddled around the two tables while beautiful pineapples, strawberries, grapes, melons, and kale were brought out to begin the arrangements. As we began to construct our creations, I was able to speak with some of the assembled women, particularly a girl my age

who had come with her mother. She told me how she often came to events when she could, and about how she was attending a local community college. In the conversations around the room, many spoke of being mothers, and being a community of women clearly was of great importance. The one man, who I came to learn worked as a cook, and therefore had a flexible schedule that allowed him to come to such events, built a spectacular fruit arrangement, drawing awe and surely a bit of jealousy from those continuing to labor over their work. In the end, though, it was not the product that mattered, it was the opportunity to come together as mothers, as parents, and as community members to unwind and socialize.



*Image 3: The construction and completion of the fruit arrangements.*

What I had begun to see at events, but which became abundantly clear at the Fruit Arrangements program, was that women attended these events, particularly the ones during the day, in far larger numbers than men. This greater involvement was reflected in responses to my survey, with one father, asked who a key individual was that he relied on for educational matters, replying “my wife contacts the school for whatever she needs.” Further, when asked how he engaged with the school, he stated that his “wife comes to events.” For many of the mothers who responded to the survey, they directly cited “motherhood” as a defining factor that both determined their level of involvement in the school, and which affected the ways in which they

were engaged. Furthermore, some mothers who cited high engagement stated they were part of the “mother volunteers.” While men were involved in some programming I attended, particularly the Lotería Night, which had a high number of families, and even the Earth Day event, which occurred on the weekend, they tended to attend in smaller numbers and less commonly than women did. After speaking with mothers and BPNC employees, I found that this was not an anomaly, but was rooted largely in the gendered roles of parenting and the way that labor and employment defined parents’ ability to engage – making stay-at-home mothers most able to reap the many benefits of the community schools’ resource networks.

The gendered difference in engagement in the school was typically explained by my informants as a result of the division of labor in the household, where the mother was more often responsible for taking care of the children and the home while the father worked outside the home. Stephanie, the Mental Health Counselor at Brighton Park Elementary, explained this much, emphasizing how it built a community of mothers.

**STEPHANIE:** A great majority of the people, or the parents that I interact with are mothers. A lot of our family members here at Brighton Park, *usually the father is the one that's working*. So they're the ones that are a little bit more involved, they are stay-at-home moms and they're able to be more involved in their students and the things that are happening at school . . . *the moms that are staying home, they are more involved with the kiddos and come into the meetings* . . . I see a lot of the moms, they get together and they, I can see them walking from one program that may be offered here, they'll go, there's other schools that offer Zumba through BPNC and they'll go together. So I definitely see how it is building the community.

Stephanie identified that mothers were generally more involved in child rearing, and that those mothers were the ones more likely to attend programming. These mothers, with the availability while their children are in school to come to the community school programs and events, are able to find spaces to socialize and build community with fellow mothers, which for many of them was their only social time outside of the house. This was consistent with my own experience at BPNC’s programming, where I would often see the same mothers coming to different events

across schools in groups, sometimes with their kids in tow. For stay-at-home and unemployed mothers, access to this programming was easier and led to a strong community of mothers that attended programs.

Stay-at-home mothers were not the only ones involved in programming – parents in families with two working parents were able to engage in programming at specific times or virtually, although the mother was still typically the one engaging in this programming. Carmen, head of the Health Promoters, discussed how working parents engage differently.

**CARMEN:** Something that I have noticed a lot, is that the parents, dad and mom, *they switched their shifts so that the parent, or the mom, is available to drop off the kids at school and tend to them during the day, while the dad is at work*, and then the dad is responsible for picking the children up from school so the mom can get ready to go work a later shift. And so then a lot of the times the parents have let us know that unfortunately they're not available to participate in Parent Patrol anymore during the mornings because *they either have to be sleeping because they have a night shift or they have to tend, you know, to the children while dad is at work and then they switch*.

Carmen discussed how, due to increased need for parents to work and fears in the wake of the COVID pandemic, there has been decreased interest and availability for parent programming. While many of these working parents only engaged in virtual programming or were too tired to engage at all, one solution employees discussed being implemented was holding programs and meetings immediately following school drop-off. Because mothers in these families with two working parents were typically the ones dropping off the children, the community schools would try to briefly catch them at that point, engaging them in albeit limited ways. In doing so, even working mothers were able to engage in the networks of BPNC in the morning while their husbands worked. This maintained the community of mothers even for these working mothers, even though they might not be able to attend the bulk of the school-day programming or the evening events that many stay-at-home mothers attended.

For single working mothers, though, the demands of working and childcare were often too significant for them to engage in BPNC's programming on a regular basis. Even some of the employees of BPNC that I spoke to, some of whom were mothers themselves, discussed the difficulties of being involved in schools while still caring and providing for their children. Elizabeth, the Resource Coordinator at Brighton Park Elementary (BPE), discussed the difficulty of being engaged in her child's school while supporting the families at BPE.

**ELIZABETH:** I'm a single mom of five, so *I'm busy at work and I'm busy at the house*, very busy. So I'm always, you know, work from home, even with like, the whole event planning made me grow a lot, but I used a lot of what I am as a parent to kind of envision what I want for the kids at the schools. I wouldn't want something lesser than what I would want for my kids.

In our interview, she discussed her role as a Resource Coordinator as similar to being a parent, and while she went to lots of the parent programming held at her school and other schools that need support, she was rarely engaged as a parent at her own child's community school. While Elizabeth cited parent engagement and parent-teacher relations as the spaces she saw the greatest need for improvement in at BPE, she also noted the irony of the fact that she was not able to find the time to engage in that way at her own child's school. Mayra, a stay-at-home mother who describes often spending the whole day at parent programming in the school building, discussed similar difficulties when she tried to get mothers to join the Parent Patrol with her.

**MAYRA:** I don't often find parents who are willing or able to participate [in Parent Patrol], mostly *because they work*.

Much in the way that the demands of work limit the ability of families with two working parents to engage, single working mothers may truly not have the time in the day to engage with BPNC's programming at all, meaning that they may not be embedded in the social capital networks to the same degree, despite having great need. While these parents often requested materials from BPNC and made use of the community schools' afterschool programming to support their

children, they were left out of the informal safety nets created by BPNC's regular parent programming.

For unemployed parents that come to BPNC with high need, they often are directed to many of BPNC's programs and services, including the parent programming, where they can find support and community – but may end up being pulled away if they gain employment. Parent programming is particularly helpful for migrant families, such as Maria's, who may lack knowledge of institutional systems for help-seeking and can activate social capital networks at this programming to get crucial resources and support. For those with the fewest connections, parent programming makes an incredible difference in their available social capital. However, when parents find employment, they often are unable to remain embedded in these networks.

**ELIZABETH:** The [migrant] families came in and they got directed to the case manager who supports the resources. So we work all together very well, you know, she did kind of get them involved in, not only parent classes but also in like the after school for their kids. So *there is a little bit more involvement [among migrant families]* but of course like they're trying to find employment. Some of them were successful in that, so like that's really good, *but then it scares them away from being actively participating in the school.* The kids have stuck in the after school programs, but they're not [involved] so much. But yes, I know that BPNC has a really good support system, you know, making them feel welcome and giving them the resources that they need.

While their ability to find employment is a great success and a credit to BPNC's ability to connect them with resources and opportunity, this success is unfortunately paired with a loss of the tight-knit community and support found in parent programming. Individuals like Maria, who has a working husband and is a stay-at-home mother raising a one-year-old with another child on the way, can sustain such community. But for those who work outside the home, this kind of engagement requires too much time to be feasible. Thus, even for those with great need, the ability to be deeply embedded in the social capital network of parent programming is often determined by whether you are working.

Although working parents may not have access to the deeper social capital networks available in parent programming, BPNC's community schools still have safety nets that keep parents engaged and ensure they are connected to resources. Stephanie, a Mental Health Counselor, describes how she can engage with working parents who can't engage in traditional settings through the flexible hours of her role.

**STEPHANIE:** At least my experience from here, the parents that want to be involved are involved, you know? I know some of them because of financial needs they're not able to be here and I understand that too, right? *But if they're not able to physically be here, they're literally a phone call away* . . . the nice thing about my position is that if they're not able to come to the school I can do home visits or I can, you know, we can also flex our time so we're able to accommodate them. Let's say they get out at five o'clock, then, I can wait for you here until five o'clock or we can go to your home, we can meet up just so we can have that discussion.

By being able to come to parents' homes or meet whenever they are available, Stephanie is able to ensure that working parents are not left out of the network of BPNC and the school entirely.

While parents do not have access to the deeper social networks in parent programming, BPNC maintains contact and ensures that they are engaged with the resource network of the organization, to the extent possible.

The limited inclusion of working mothers in the organizational social capital networks was not always as present as it was at the time of my research, though, according to some informants. Carmen, a close informant as the head of the Health Promoters, was a parent at Burroughs Elementary when BPNC first began to partner with Brighton Park's schools around 20 years ago. From the get-go, she was deeply involved in BPNC's community schools programming, ultimately becoming employed by BPNC. From her perspective, mothers – even working mothers – experienced work as less of a barrier to inclusion in the communities around the community schools at the time.

**CARMEN:** So I know that things times have changed, right, and now there's usually a need for both parents to work, but at the time when the agency first came into the school, there were a lot of stay-at-home moms, so a lot of parents or a lot of moms didn't have to work . . . *Those moms*

*who did have to work, they still knew of each other and they still would reach out to me and other parents* to say, hey, you know, I'm running late from work, I'm a little bit late to pick up my child, could you tell them to wait for me in the main office? So they were all easily accessible. Because we were doing this for such a long time, for many years, that I and the parents that I worked with, we were familiar with the students' commute to and from school. So we knew, you know, what streets they would walk along from. We knew what time they would get to school, what time they had to leave. So we communicated with each other, even those parents that were working, they still counted on us for support because they had different hours.

Carmen describes an environment where everyone, in their excitement about the new community school model, quickly became engaged and formed connections with one another. In contrast, she believes that parents now, because of the increased need to work and decreased excitement about engagement, are less connected and less able to help one another.

Putnam (2000) argued that American communities had lost their civic engagement from earlier decades, characterized by the erosion of traditional civic institutions like Parent Teacher Associations, decreasing available social capital. In school social capital scholarship, this has led to the lauding of religious schools, such as Catholic schools with at least 50% religious adherence, as a way of preserving in-group social capital without sacrificing racial diversity (Coleman 1988; Bryk et al. 1993; Putnam 2000). These schools were also stated to increase trust through intergenerational closure (the extent to which parents in a community know the parents of their children's friends) within and between families through both religious and secular family-oriented events (Coleman 1988; Bryk et al. 1993) – creating networks of trust similar to those created in community school programming. This insularity and closure creates strong internal cohesion, but may also result in limited access to new outside information. It is hard to say why this school engagement is not as strongly sought by working parents today in public schools such as Brighton Park's community schools, as their disengagement precluded my interaction with them at events, but previous research has found that the decreased centrality of organizational social capital in an urban neighborhood can sometimes result because



out-of-neighborhood friendships increased, broadening networks (Small 2004). As a result, while it is hard to conjecture the effect of decreased organizational social capital for working parents on their overall social capital, it is significant to note that this is a recent development, and that work outside of the home has not necessarily always precluded inclusion in the network of involved mothers.

While fathers and working mothers tended not to be deeply involved in the parent programming that BPNC conducted during the school day, it is important to note that many of them were involved in evening programming and in certain events. Meliza, Kelly's Resource Coordinator, described the involvement of fathers and male community members in their programming.

**MELIZA:** Even in our programs, we tend to see more moms coming in as opposed to any dads. *The only program that's an exception would be our guitar class because parents come in, like male parents or they're not even Kelly parents, they're just community members, but they're males, right, or they identify as males.* So that would be the only exception but when it's like other programs, I would say it would be more the moms coming in. The moms and like, bringing in their kids.

Meliza describes how she primarily sees fathers enrolled in programming, aside from the guitar classes. Because I was not able to attend any of the meetings of the guitar classes, I am not able to speak on the relationships formed therein, but it is nonetheless notable that this is stated to be the "only exception" to the largely female parent and community member engagement in school programming. While men and fathers are engaged in certain spaces, mothers nonetheless dominate most of the social spaces in the community schools, playing an important role in their family's social capital connections.

For the parents and employees I spoke with, motherhood played a crucial role in who was present and engaged deeply in programming, meaning that mothers played an important role in connecting their families to resources available through BPNC. On the aggregate, while the

amount that parents work has increased over the past 40 years, the amount of time spent with kids has not decreased (Small 2009). As a result, with mothers in Brighton Park increasingly having to work to provide for their families, they faced increased demands on their time, even before adding BPNC parent programming into the mix. While this programming often offered childcare or opportunities to bring their children, what Small (2009) argued was “multi-tasking” in the context of childcare centers, this nonetheless imposed a feeling of guilt on mothers who simply lacked the time or chose not to be engaged with the school. This was in spite of the great amounts of labor they already did for their family. Elizabeth, the employee with a child at a BPNC school, described this guilt, but she simply could not find the time to involve herself in the school. She, luckily, had great social service connections as a BPNC employee, but she still discussed that she did not make use of them to the extent that she should, or that she would encourage other parents to. This is significant because involvement in this programming greatly increased potential avenues to resources, termed by Coleman (1988) as *closure*.

The parents, typically stay-at-home mothers, engaged in programming have many ties that connect them to each other’s resources and which can direct them to BPNC’s resources, much like when a fellow parent directed Maria to BPNC’s health resources. This creates “closure,” which creates strong in-group social capital and more robust resource connections (Coleman 1988). For parents not involved in programming, while BPNC reaches out to parents directly through employees such as Stephanie, they have fewer avenues to resources and do not have access to casual relations that might lead them to access connections of either other parents or of BPNC employees. As a result, these parents not involved in programming do not experience the strong norms and trust associated with the regular group interaction in programming. While having a smaller number of mothers involved in the regular programming

forges strong connections and great benefits for those mothers, the relative disengagement of working parents due to the many demands they face can create great inequality in avenues to available resources for these different sets of parents, and thus highly differential social capital for different families.

## **VI. Strategies and Cohorts: How Do Different Parents Engage Differently?**

While many parents discussed receiving similar and overlapping benefits from their inclusion in the social capital networks in BPNC's parent programming, their styles of engagement with the organization varied in two primary ways – their strategies, and their cohort. In the coming section, I will describe and theorize the differential strategies of engagement and organizational framing in order to promote better understanding of the ways that parents sought to use parent programming to fulfill their own individual objectives. To do so, I will draw from previous literature on *objectives* (purposes that individuals aim to achieve – which I adapt as *engagement styles*; see Small 2009) and *cohorts* (groups of individuals who share a common experience within a specific period; see Small 2004) and their effect on organizational social capital. These are important because they affect an individual's *habitus*, or the disposition that one brings to a given setting, which determines one's ability to form and activate social capital networks (Bourdieu 1986). The engagement styles and dispositions of each parent I spoke to were unique, and thus I will describe how each parent exemplified what I consider to be the most essential factors that I observed.

### *Parents' Support-Seeking Strategies*

For each of the parents who I spoke to who had become engaged in BPNC's parent programming, they came to the programs with their own objectives and strategies to support

them in these pursuits. These strategies were not random but were informed by a combination of what I'm sure were their dispositions as individuals and their various circumstances that led them to be engaged. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the manners that parents engaged but represents the strategies that I observed and that were discussed for me. These strategies of support-seeking can be described in three figures – the *networker*, the *skill-builder*, and the *socializer*.

The networker is the style of engagement most represented in social capital theory – the active investor who seeks out relationships to build one's available social capital. This individual is consistent with the common scholarly reading of Bourdieu (1986). The individual who encompasses this strategy best is Alba, who describes attending programs with the intent of walking up to various individuals and finding out what they have to offer her.

**ALBA:** Sometimes I get the connections through the programs that they come to give us. And there is also [the Bilingual Advisory Council]. *That's when I make connections* . . . Well, I look at a person . . . *It's not that people come out with things, I go and ask. And what do you have here?* . . . This one is giving away things or whatnot. Then he tells me, oh, well, I come from [unintelligible], I come from Brighton Park, I do this. Do you like it? Can we help you with this? That is when I start having connections with the Council. So there are already several people that I am getting to know . . . like right now, I would like to work for the Council to support me in giving me a job. Like right now in the summer.

Alba knows how the organizational spaces of BPNC work – she knows that the individuals at programs have been assembled by the organization because they have something to offer her. As a result, she goes to these events with the intention of finding resources, whether it be employment opportunities at BPNC or financial assistance. I experienced her strategy of engagement firsthand – while seated at the Community Health Fair, she approached me to see what I resources I had for her, undeterred by my broken Spanish. At the conclusion of my interview as well, she asked if I would be willing to talk to her sons about my college experience, which of course I agreed to. Despite her critiques of the public schools as unsafe as a result of

poor management, she still was deeply engaged and sought the many resources such as by becoming a Parent Mentor. As a networker, she intentionally sought these networks and engaged primarily to reap the rewards that social capital could offer.

In contrast, the skill-builder encompasses the parents who are engaged in pursuit of specific opportunities to build skills rather than the expansion of their resource network. While they are ultimately connected with broader resources and embedded in the social capital network, this was not the objective of their initial engagement. Maria, mother of three (soon to be four) and a recent migrant from Peru, exemplifies the skill-builder archetype. It was her pursuit of English coursework that led her to BPNC's community schools. While this search initially led her to courses at a parish center, the connections she made there then led her to the more consistent courses held at Richards, where she enrolled her daughter and became deeply engaged. It was through the Parent University's English courses that she discovered her interest in nursing school, where she found care for her asthmatic husband, and where she found a welcoming community and a home. The initial strategy that led her to the programming, and her reason for her continued engagement, lay in BPNC's ability to assist her in building her skills so that she could pursue her goals.

The final archetype of support-seeking is the socializer, who joins the programming for the purpose of social interaction and relaxation rather than the pursuit of resources or networks. This strategy is most exemplified by Mayra, who engages primarily because she appreciates the ability to relax and socialize with other mothers. As described before, she enjoys going to programming and spending the entire day at the school, from Parent Patrol in the morning and through programming like the PAC meeting and Fruit Arrangements workshop where I met her. And while she appreciates the support that her involvement gains her, it is relaxation and

socialization in a community of mothers that motivates her continued involvement and keeps her engaged in these crucial networks.

BPNC's curation of social capital networks in its parent programming was crucial in engaging parents from across these different strategies of support, despite their many objectives and reasons for engaging. The curation of social capital networks through the creation of casual social spaces for parents to interact with each other and other high-resource organizations is crucial for parents in working-class neighborhoods like Brighton Park, where limited social spaces and high economic need make assembling one's own high-resource social networks challenging (Small 2009). Thus, this curation plays a large role in equalizing opportunity between working-class neighborhoods and upper-class neighborhoods, which already have existing high-resource networks and can thus cultivate their own social capital more easily. For networkers like Alba, BPNC's ability to assemble many potential resources and make them available to her is enough to facilitate her networks. But for those who are skill-builders and socializers, the creation of a strong community and the institution of pro-social norms was important for making sure parents were able to access resources. These norms spanned everything from the sense of co-operation that led the Parent Mentor in Maria's English class to encourage her to seek medical support for her husband from BPNC to the Bingo card that parents could fill by talking to booths at the Community Health Fair in return for a raffle ticket. By brokering the conditions for social capital enrichment in parent programming and events for parents across these strategies of support-seeking, BPNC was able to ensure that each parent was able to access the support that they wanted and needed.

## *Cohorts and the Parent-Employee Boundary*

While my interviews were not numerous enough to definitively establish a distinction between cohorts, I did notice that proximity to the initial grassroots groundswell of parent support for BPNC's community schools had a significant impact on how parents who were also employees discussed their roles. This is consistent with Small's (2004) observation in Villa Victoria, where proximity to the grassroots organizing which shaped the neighborhood nonprofit affected how people described the community and their hopes for the neighborhood. While each neighborhood is distinct, it seems that here also, a distinction has begun to emerge between those who were part of the initial movement and those who were hired later.

For Carmen, who had gotten involved with BPNC first as a parent when it first began partnering with schools, she was incredibly adept at garnering trust from the community, allowing her to be what I call a *super-broker* of social networks, but at the price of her ability to engage with the community as any other community member would. Carmen describes the transformation of Brighton Park's schools under BPNC as the construction of a community.

**CARMEN:** [BPNC] built a community essentially. At the time, the community was taken over by many gangs around the school. Insecurity, fear from the parents. I remember that the programs, especially in the winter time, when the days are very short, it was scary to go to school, because it was practically taken over by gangs there. So to start doing these programs, to have more parents involved, more community, that began to change a lot, the security around the school began to change a lot. ***Once BPNC came in, that started to change, everybody started becoming a little bit friendlier with each other.*** They started seeing each other more often at schools and they were at the school and they started becoming, you know, more familiar with each other and where they lived, they knew who each other were and so ***it opened up the opportunity for them to become a tight-knit community, and to rely on each other.***

Immediately after BPNC came into the school, Carmen and the parents began organizing to support the effort, helping create and support BPNC's community school programming.

**CARMEN:** The first community school that BPNC worked with was Burroughs, so I was already there, my children were already attending the school. This must have been, um, about 20 years ago. So when I was already there with my children at the school, BPNC came in and started, you know, speaking to the parents about parent programming and offering workshops and

things like that. And so *we were all very excited for them to be the first time that a community organization came into the school* and offered parenting, or free programming. We right off the bat organized a huge community event when *we went door knocking and asked for donations, um, for food and things like that, for this big community party*, so it was like, huge and exciting to us that a community organization was coming into the building and providing, um, programming and learning opportunities for us.

Because she has been there since the beginning, transitioning from a very involved parent into an early employee as a Parent Coordinator, her involvement was paired with her ability to support herself and her family. However, while her ability to build community was a great resource for residents of Brighton Park, it took a toll on her, making it challenging for her to have friends and to spend time around Brighton Park without getting pulled into work.

**CARMEN:** I find a lot of support in my children and they are who I socialize with the most and I know that I can go to them when I need some grounding, or when I'm feeling stressed, I invite them over for dinner and we hang out over the weekend. So that's really my support system. I don't have much family here, as far as siblings or anything like that, so I tend to rely on my children for that. *I try my best to, you know, leave work at work and be disconnected, but um, it's very, very hard to do . . .* I do have a close friend who doesn't live nearby, but she is very close to me and she does not have anything to do with BPNC. So I appreciate that when I am able to hang out with her um it's not work related and *my friend knows this about me and knows how hard it is for me to disconnect from work*. So every time she invites me to hang out, we always go north.

Carmen is practically an institution of BPNC, so ingrained in the Health Promoters and the various parent networks that her face is known throughout the neighborhood – she refers to herself as “like a celebrity” and she cannot be in Brighton Park without getting drawn into work. This is a product of her early grassroots role in BPNC, which both augmented her ability to broker social capital networks, but also demanded a great deal of labor of her, made responsible for the community's well-being. As part of the earlier cohort in BPNC's staff, Carmen displays deep and personal connection with her fellow parents rooted in her grassroots support of the organization.

In the latter cohort, employees displayed a less direct link with fellow parents in Brighton Park's community schools, meaning that they bore less personal responsibility while still being



effective brokers of social capital. Many of these employees joined not as parents involved in the schools but as community members of Brighton Park or nearby neighborhoods pursuing a career in social work. This career orientation toward the work meant that the connections forged were primarily as co-workers, making it harder to gain support that one might expect from fellow parents.

**ELIZABETH:** My friends are, *because of work there's a lot through BPNC*. Yeah, I think it's so much I'm with the BPNC community and I kind of just thought through that, yeah, I don't think I have friends, I would say, within Brighton Park, because of the role that I play. But I think through my school, I don't think so, I don't know pretty much, I really don't, I just know the main office folks at the high school, who the assistant principals are . . . but *as far as support, let's say, I can't pick up my kid from school one day, well, there's no such thing for me*. Yeah, I would just have to go and pick them up.

For Elizabeth, her BPNC co-workers are her friends, but this means that she lacks the supportive connections that she could gain from having close connections at the school her child attends, meaning that she cannot call upon these friends to support her in childcare or after-school pickup. In a similar manner, Elizabeth also felt that her role primarily as an employee limited her engagement as a parent with the resources and events that BPNC offers.

**ELIZABETH:** I kind of know what the resources are, but if I'm being honest, *as a parent, I don't utilize them the way I would*, just because I think that I get stuck in the mentality of being under BPNC. Oftentimes I refer people with the resources that we have, but I'm always thinking like Elizabeth not as Mom, you know. So it's hard for me to, *I wish I was a little bit more involved*, I don't think this year I was involved in anything with [my daughter's] school. Just in terms of like my flexibility or availability, I'm a little bit more flexible with my schedule. However, when program's running at my school, there's no flexibility there. It's like, I have to be there. So even if I wanted to, I'm not as involved in her school as I wish I was as a parent, but I know that there's pretty much a lot of resources in that school.

Unlike Carmen, whose entry into the organizational field of BPNC was first as a fellow parent and someone seeking support, Elizabeth's entry was as an employee. While her children attend summer programming through BPNC and she wants to be more involved going forward, Elizabeth nonetheless lacks the robust, grassroots network that Carmen finds herself centrally embedded in. While Elizabeth is a strong broker of institutional resources for families, her own

engagement with BPNC is framed as an employee – shaping her *habitus* and limiting not only her ability but also her comfortability seeking support from BPNC’s resources.

The two cohorts – distinguished by the distinction between initial grassroots engagement and engagement primarily as an employee – mark a significant break in the way that employees in the organization engaged themselves. Both engagement styles had their advantages and disadvantages. While Carmen’s long-time, grassroots engagement style gained her incredible trust and social capital, it also limited her own ability to relax in the community, causing her to seek support from family and friends outside of Brighton Park. And while Elizabeth’s employee-centered engagement style allowed for slightly stronger boundaries between work and home, she often had to prioritize work over home, limiting her own ability to develop social capital. For both mothers, working for BPNC demanded extensive time and commitment, with both mentioning that it was difficult to leave work behind at the end of the day, but it also provided the opportunity for both mothers to have an incredible impact on children and families far beyond their own. While their boundaries and styles of engagement differed, they both played a crucial role in the community, and were important brokers in the development of social capital networks in the Brighton Park community.

## **VII. Socialization, Support, and Safety: What Benefits Do Participants Find?**

Having identified what led to parents becoming deeply engaged and embedded in the social capital networks available from BPNC, this next section will address benefits and opportunities that parents experience as part of the parent programming. This section will span the aspects of support experienced as a member of the community, the tangible skills and employment opportunities gained through the programs, and the inroads that parents were able to

create with the school as a result. By better understanding the benefits associated with inclusion in these social capital networks, we can more clearly see the differences between what is accessible to the primarily stay-at-home mother demographic and their families, and what may be out of reach of those who are outside of this network.

*Parents: Socialization, Relaxation, and Support*

For the parents most involved in BPNC's parent programming, especially those with the *socializer* engagement style, socialization was a crucial element of the benefits reaped through inclusion in these spaces – allowing them to connect with each other and get support as parents. In fact, many parents described having little to no social interaction outside of their family other than in BPNC's parent programming. Maria describes how, as a migrant, she was introduced to BPNC through Richards, one of their community schools, and from there began to grow a social network.

**MARIA:** When I arrived I didn't know anyone, never left my house until, well, it's a supermarket called El Güero that had a flyer about a parish center where they were giving English classes and I went to find out. It was there that the social worker helped me get my daughter admitted [to the Catholic school]. And he told me about Richards. That was where I put my eldest daughter because the center of the Catholic Church was only a [unintelligible]. So when I went to Richards, where I began to get to know the Parents' University, that was where Miss Navarro told me about the [BPNC] programs, that was where I started to join the groups that now I belong to. Well, I'm going to start in July, but I was elected to the LSC. *And that's where, in the [BPNC] groups I'm in, I met friends. My social group has grown a lot thanks to Richards.*

Maria discussed how being involved in the community school, even though it was initially for English courses, has led to a vast growth in social groups and friendships, and even to election to the Local School Council (LSC). The importance of programming, such as the Parent University program that Maria describes, was emphasized by parents throughout the survey responses. For one parent, these events were described as her means of engaging with the school and also the space in which she maintains connections with the community. Other parents made similar

statements, emphasizing the importance of meetings and programs as a central part of their experience in the community of Brighton Park at large. Participation in this programming was crucial to people's connections and engagement with the community at large, providing a space to socialize with fellow community members in Brighton Park.

The benefits of community and socialization were not limited to school-day programming most conducive to socialization – it also played an important role in the benefits gained from objective-oriented courses such as ESL and GED courses sought out by *skill-builders*. This was in spite of reports from employees that most community-building activities occurred in the more casual, parent-oriented programs at the elementary level, where informal potlucks and the like were more common. Meliza, the Resource Coordinator from Kelly College Prep, reported that, even in their GED courses with many community members and hosted in the high school, participants became very close, organizing a snack rotation and a potluck.

**MELIZA:** Within the span of five months, [the parents in the GED course] were able to build that relationship where they would each take turns and either bring in snacks or coffee. We would provide the coffee to them or whatever they need, they request it and then they would just bring in the snacks. But they would coordinate that between each other and then we would give them the freedom of hosting their own potluck, so if they felt like they wanted to have a potluck, they would just coordinate amongst each other. So I feel like *even our programs that serve that purpose [of achieving an objective] are building that relationship with each other and just getting to know each other more, that they end up signing up for other programs together.*

In addition to forming a close community that seeks out further opportunities to socialize with one another, the group of parents Meliza describes also join other programming accessible at the school as a group. The community that parents built in programs, even the most objective-oriented ones, clearly held great value and offered benefits for their social well-being.

Programming offered not only the opportunity to meet other parents and socialize with one another, but also paths to forming relationships with parents who have children in the same

classes and to support one another. This was especially true for Mayra, a parent with multiple children in special education courses, whose only contact with other mothers of students in special education courses was through her participation in programming such as gardening, *migajón*, and nutrition.

**MAYRA:** I have about three other moms who have children in the same [special education] class . . . *We support each other* . . . We participate in the [parent] classes.

Through this community, she is able to talk to the other mothers, making her feel very comfortable around these mothers and supporting communication networks that they have created. The alienation of families from special education processes and procedures, especially Spanish-speaking Latino parents, has been shown to cause parents to struggle with navigating the complex systems around special education, leaving them isolated and confused (Aceves 2014). As a result, the additional Spanish-language support from BPNC and the casual community of other supportive parents found in programming are particularly impactful for Mayra.

**MAYRA:** I feel very comfortable and am in communication with other moms. *They help me a lot with my children and they support me* . . . I interact with the moms during school activities. I do the garden classes, the nutrition classes, and art.

She credits the parent programming with forming and sustaining these connections of socialization and support, with BPNC doing the work of creating the conditions for these friendships to be sustained, where parents might have to create the conditions themselves to socialize otherwise, something they may not have the time or desire to do. As a result, parent programming was crucial for sustaining the benefit of social relationships and relationships of support between like parents.

The feeling of support extended beyond parents supporting each other as parents and into their individual and community aspirations and support for one another. For Maria, this support

was important for her own aspirations in the short term to learn English and in the long term to study nursing.

**MARIA:** As far as I have goals, I would like to study nursing. Right now it limits me because all the classes are only in English and I know too little to receive them 100%, so what I have just studied is English, [I have] at least three more cycles to be able to study just now. ***But what I do like is that this community gives a lot of support so that one can go, even if it is in private peace, to reach the goal.***

While Maria later discusses that she does not feel that the fellow program attendees are able to contribute to her pursuit of her goals, the support “in private peace” to reach her goal is nonetheless seen as a resource that she can draw upon in her learning journey. These spaces were also important for helping community members feel heard and supported in conversations on diverse topics, including safety and violence.

**STEPHANIE:** It was a [safety] workshop, but it felt almost like a group discussion because ***everybody was just talking about their own experience*** and some of them, even the experience as they migrated here, the difference of, you know, the communities that they have, to be aware, you know, unfortunately, you know, the gang involvement in different areas, right? And they're not familiar with that. So, you know, there was a father who was saying, you know, I didn't know, they were coming up to me and asking me these things, and I didn't know that. Like, they just migrated from Venezuela, those are different, they don't have those things over there, right? Or at least different things. So it was, it was really a group discussion and it was a good turnout. So that ***everybody was able to like, you know, tell their story***, some of our families that have migrated here already had experienced gun violence.

In the conversation at BPE, Stephanie describes how parents and community members were able to share their own experiences with violence in their lives, particularly for migrants who may have had different experiences in their home countries. As a result, the sense of support that parents and community members were able to find in programming was important to them in whatever their goals and aspirations may be, or just simply in being heard.

Finally, many parents discussed how simply being able to relax and coexist with other parents was an important experience from their time in parent programming. Especially for Mayra, a *socializer* who named the school when asked what her favorite place in the community was, relaxation was the most important part of what she felt she got from this space. While she

went to programs and events for various reasons, including learning new skills, socializing, and supporting the community, relaxation is what she described as being the most important. Even for the Parent Patrol, through which she received a stipend and was able to help keep her community safe, relaxation was a crucial element at play.

**MAYRA:** I find it very relaxing to be there [in Parent Patrol] helping other moms help us. *I relax a lot.*

Maria, a *skill-builder* who really appreciated getting involved in the school and being able to pursue her academic and career goals, also discussed how important it was to her to have this space to destress and enjoy “coexistence” with other parents.

**MARIA:** I feel that Richards’ programs help you get more involved as a parent, because you can see more of the students’ needs, but that’s also the case, because *it helps us grow as people as human beings and keep ourselves busy at the same time, clear our minds to relax, because of so much stress and so many problems that one can have at home* and because, as I say, the atmosphere is pleasant and apart from that, this is it. You come to feel at home with friends and *spend time in the joy of coexistence.*

This sense of being home, the feeling of being welcome and in community, was a beautiful feeling for Maria and for many informants. The value of being able to relax in these spaces cannot be understated as one of the many benefits that were offered.

By building communities that could socialize and relax with one another as well as offer a network of support, BPNC’s parent programming offered key benefits to many of its involved parents and community members. Through this community, parents were able to support one another, both through the resources that they may have to share within their social capital networks, and through the intangible resources of emotional and personal support. This is consistent with Small’s (2009) study of mothers with children in childcare centers, which revealed that these centers facilitated the establishment of new friendships, and that these friendships strongly correlated with reduced mental and material hardship through the centers’ brokering of social connections. Similar to this study, many of the parents in this study

established domain-specific connections, connecting with one another only in the context of BPNC programming. By creating the conditions for these interactions and establishing the institutional norms of community that ground them, BPNC's programming offered what was, for some, the only space for community and socialization outside of the home particularly the stay-at-home mothers who had to stay home and care for their children outside of errands and the school day.

### *BPNC: Employment, Skill-Building, and Assistance*

Involvement in parent programming offered not only the opportunity to build community and gain support and resources from fellow parents, but it also provided connections to extensive supports in and through BPNC itself to help parents, especially *skill-builders* and *networkers*, achieve their goals and get help. While Maria discussed how the support of fellow English attendees gave her support to pursue her goals "in private peace," she also acknowledged that this was insufficient for her to reach her goal of going to school for nursing.

**MARIA:** The truth is [I do not feel other parents can help me in my goal to become a nurse]. The majority who are in English are older people, mostly quite old . . . *I learned about nursing from a course that Ms. Navarro taught. She is the one who helps the community.* She already told me about a course that was completely free but only that it was purely English, she wrote to me, but I couldn't take this one. There are many parents who, that is, especially mothers who go to migajón classes, crafts, nutrition, but it doesn't look like they want to pursue a career . . . I want to learn English, yes, because it is frustrating not to be able to communicate in cases like this [interview] today but also because I want to learn. I want to grow. I'm 34 years old, but I think you should never give up forever. You have to want more, I can still study and I can achieve many goals and that is also an example for my daughters.

For Maria, as a *skill-builder*, the institutional supports that the community school had to offer were practically the most important in her ability to achieve her goals and to continue to grow as a person. By providing programming that informed her about nursing as a career and relationships that connected her to courses she could take, the community school's informational



supports were invaluable. Carmen similarly valued the supports and assistance that were made available in the community schools, which saved her from an abusive relationship.

**CARMEN:** At Burroughs when BPNC started services there, I was in a situation of domestic violence and at the time I didn't know. I hadn't recognized them in that way and BPNC started to offer workshops on that topic at that school when I was volunteering at Burroughs. So I participated in those workshops and it's the first time that I saw, you know, I was able to recognize the signs and I saw the domestic violence wheel that, you know, categorizes the early signs and the different types of domestic violence . . . I was able to take all that information that I received from those workshops and leave that situation behind. *Those workshops really brought me back to life and gave me back, you know, my personality, my happiness, and my passion for helping others.* So, it's something that I very much appreciate and I know that if it hadn't been for BPNC offering services, you know, at that, of course, community school, as *I don't know where I would be right now.*

It is important to note that by embedding BPNC's domestic violence supports in the school, they were able to reach Carmen, who didn't even know that she needed it, and otherwise would not have sought it. The information and supports that BPNC provided within programming was life-advancing, if not life-saving, for many parents with whom I spoke.

The BPNC employees involved in the community schools were not only able to provide resources within their programming, but also connect and refer parents to other departments and resources within BPNC. Carmen described how the Health Promoters, as the parents present at all events and schools, often serve this purpose, serving as individuals whom the community deeply trusted, and with the ability to connect them to other organizational resources.

**CARMEN:** We've really taken the time to build those trusting relationships. *Parents a lot of the times do come to us first and they feel confident coming to us and knowing us, we will be able to provide assistance in some way.* The Health Promoters are connected with most all departments of BPNC and we're confident that if a parent comes to us and needs any type of assistance, whether that be not related to health and wellness, but related to housing, related to migration services, those assistance for any other resource, the parents have been able to come to us and we know that if we're not able to provide them the immediate assistance, we can refer them out to either another department or another organization if BPNC doesn't offer those services . . . Once they come to us, we immediately branch them out to whatever other resources they need.

It is not only the Health Promoters who provide this service, though. As Meliza and Elizabeth describe, they both play an important role as the Resource Coordinators at their respective

schools by connecting parents who may feel more comfortable coming to them than BPNC directly.

**MELIZA:** *[Parents] feel more comfortable like coming to me [for resources than BPNC directly].* There was one parent that needed help with, like the medical card, like, applying for it. I don't know how to fill it out, there was like, I was transitioning when we were supposed to learn it, so I didn't feel comfortable, especially filling out a document like that. So I just refer them to our case manager, which then can assist her with filling it out, or redirecting her to a BPNC office where she could get that type of referral.

**ELIZABETH:** I connect [parents with resources], just because, like I said, we are very lucky to have these services, like, different people in the building. People are gonna be helpful with these resources. So it just now falls on me. But everybody, I think everybody in the building plays a big role in this, especially . . . if a parent comes to me and says, hey Elizabeth, like I'm having a hard time paying my bills this month . . . usually the referral process for me is okay, like I'll get the information and I'll shoot an email to the case manager on site. And so the follow-up usually happens pretty quickly. It happens within 48 hours so that, you know, *we are working not only with each other, but with the families, making them feel like they have support.*

Because each of these employees have built trusting relationships through parent programming and their status as fellow community members, they provide crucial links between parents at programming and the institutional resources that BPNC contains. The resources they can connect parents to include various supports that can help parents and community members with anything from housing to health to migration to employment.

BPNC employees were able to leverage the trust that parents had in them not only to refer them to internal resources, but also to refer them out to other organizations, making use of BPNC's widespread institutional resource connections. Carmen provided two examples of mothers who came to her with situations that required outside referrals, and which required a great deal of trust to confide in Carmen herself.

**CARMEN:** A mother just came to me who has a child with autism and she called my contact to ask me if I could help her, that *she was lost in the system, that she didn't know how to find resources for her child*, so if you have the case managers. And I spoke with the director and she answered, I said what can we do in this case? So she put a case manager to assist this mother and guide her through the entire system, because she was stuck. [Another mother came to me because her] daughter suffered sexual abuse during a visit to a family house party, and her mother approached me to ask me, *what should I do?* I have to put this restraining order in. I'm going to get the photo, whatever. They're problems. You can't even imagine how big they are, that you

start thinking, how this mom, she can have so much confidence in a person who works for the community and who knows that she can give her such great advice?

Carmen believed that parents' great trust in her resulted from a knowledge that she and BPNC possessed broad connections that could assist as well as a sense of trust built through consistent interaction at events and schools. This trust was built not only in physical programming but also in a Facebook group that she and the Health Promoters created, where they held workshops and brought in external resources like doctors to share information for community members, as a "family."

**CARMEN:** When the pandemic started, [the Health Promoters] created a page for a program, we have what is a nutrition-based program but also with resources to apply for SNAP, so from that program, we created a Facebook page account, this is a translates to like, Shopping for Good and Healthy Food, essentially, and we created this Facebook page that now has over 2,000 community participants on there . . . Especially during the pandemic, *my inbox would have been flooded with, you know, messages of people seeking out resources.* Unfortunately, I would have people that would reach out with suicidal thoughts. And so I was fortunate enough to have contact information of people who were able to help them, the therapists and the directors were able to give them that immediate assistance. *A lot of people have really built that trust and that strong relationship with us.*

Through the online forum, the Health Promoters' programming work was made incredibly expansive, making it easier to connect parents instantaneously with external resources, as well as making the Health Promoters themselves more accessible to contact when resources were urgently needed. This embedding of external resources was common, such as when I attended a New Homeowner Workshop hosted by BPNC, where different professionals from different stages in the homebuying process came in to talk to attendees. By providing constant interaction to build trust in these social capital connections, parents and community members were able to pursue the external resources via BPNC, where otherwise they may not know where to turn or have time to deal with bureaucratic processes.

While BPNC possessed extensive resources that it provided for the community, some parents described frustration that these resources were not administered fairly and consistently.

One employee explained to me that this was in part due to changing policies as the organization grew and HR requirements changed. Additionally, they moved into a new office, and many individuals were not as accessible to walk-ins as they had been when BPNC was smaller. As a result, people who had grown used to what BPNC was and how things were done were sometimes frustrated or confused that policies had changed. Alba described her own frustration at not being able to be hired as a crafts instructor for the parent programming, despite being recommended by a former instructor.

**ALBA:** [I was recommended to apply to be] the instructor for crafts and I filled out the application and they rejected it because they supposedly wanted me to provide my Social Security [Number] . . . *The requirements are required, but sometimes I say that I see them as priorities* because other people accommodate themselves with the ITIN, with the card . . . On another occasion my mother was denied the help of the [funding assistance because they ran out of funds] . . . [when I was a Parent Mentor] I had the workshop with [the Executive Director of BPNC] who also told us that if we wanted to apply for the service, and I told my mother, but Patrick never responded . . . [I am now in] Youth Violence Prevention, the program's name is, I'm with it, but it's a bonus that it gives us, it is not an hourly job. Right now, I mean, I'm trying to settle in wherever I can.

While she was able to get gigs as a Parent Mentor and with Youth Violence Prevention, both of which provided stipends or bonuses, she felt that her denial of hourly employment with BPNC was the result of not being preferred. Additionally, when her mother applied for funding assistance, she was told that they had run out, and she had to advocate to get the funds because the Executive Director was not returning her calls. From Alba's perspective as a *networker*, the social capital networks that connected families to BPNC were affected by preference, and required cultivation and persistence in order to garner benefits. As a result, some people noted that the rules and norms that governed the administration of BPNC's resources were shifting and lacked transparency in these shifts, making it difficult for parents to navigate when previously-accepted means of accessing resources were no longer fruitful.

Due to the involvement of BPNC in community schools programming and its extensive resources and connections as an agency, parents within the organizational social capital network were able to make great gains. These gains included informational and support resources within programming, referrals to other employees and departments from programming, and referrals to external organizations that could offer their own unique resources and connections. By bringing BPNC into the school building and offering the services and supports directly to engaged parents, Brighton Park's community schools were able to more directly ensure that parents were aware of the available resources and build trusting relationships that encouraged parents to take advantage of these resources. That said, these resources were in some cases governed by the rules that BPNC had to follow as a non-profit and the logistical limitations of an agency trying to meet great demand. Nonetheless, connections with BPNC were highly profitable with parents, and were significant for their ability to find social services and supports.

*School: Institutional Relationships*

Brighton Park's community schools were able to facilitate not only profitable parent-parent and parent-BPNC connections, but also parent-school connections through the nature of BPNC's programming within the school building. Mayra, a *socializer* and stay-at-home mother involved in the Parent Patrol, discussed at length how much she loved the school more than any other community space, sharing that she often spent the full day at the school. Because she was there for Parent Patrol, she would stay for the Parent Advisory Council and for later programming, facilitating her involvement in the school building despite describing generally not getting involved with teachers or administrators unless she had to. Carmen, who quickly got involved in the many programs and meetings that were initially run at Burroughs, similarly described how involved she got in the school through various programs and committees.

**CARMEN:** My interaction with school staff, admin, parents was more so in the mornings because I was still volunteering my hours of Parent Patrol. So I did that in the mornings and then switched up to my Parent Coordinator position in the evening. ***So I was at the school pretty much all day long.*** I was also involved in advisory committees like for No Child Left Behind and the Parent Advisory Committee, so ***I did interact a lot with the school staff during the day.***

For Carmen, her increased involvement in programming in the school led her to pursue a position as a Parent Coordinator and to develop strong connections with school staff. Similarly, Alba, a *networker*, appreciated the opportunity to become a Parent Mentor in the classroom through BPNC, where she got a stipend as a classroom paraprofessional.

**ALBA:** I was a Parent Mentor, those who help in the classrooms, but I was struggling to get that support during the pandemic . . . I see that they are giving that opportunity to an elderly woman and they are just making it virtual? What are they doing? . . . I know that this woman doesn't even have children in school. Why are they giving her the opportunity? But for me, I have my son at home and I am supporting him in school because on that occasion my child was going to start kindergarten late, so there was a lot of help needed. So I walked around there and I don't know how they did it but they accommodated me there, but I had to walk around. ***I really liked being a Parent Mentor because I support my son . . . They helped me and supported me with the rent during the pandemic.*** And yes, they gave me help and I am grateful for that but sometimes we don't have the opportunity because ***I would like a job that they would give me.***

Alba appreciated the ability to get involved in the school through BPNC, although she did question why non-parents were similarly given the opportunity to get involved in the school in this way – expressing her opinion that parents should be prioritized for these roles in the school. For both parents, the ability to forge connections in the school and gain some form of employment represented a great benefit gained from BPNC's involvement with the schools.

Beyond just giving the opportunity to be involved in the school and forge relationships, BPNC's community school programming worked hard to ensure that parents were involved in the systems through which teachers and administrators might try to reach them. At programming, BPNC employees would take the opportunity to leverage their connections with parents and ensure that teachers could reach them. This is particularly important because not all parents can or want to be involved in non-BPNC school events, so this ensures they still have baseline communication lines with the school itself. Stephanie, the Mental Health Counselor at BPE,

described how she saw her role as a BPNC employee in part as helping teachers not have to forge relationships as deeply themselves, making sure that all parents were registered for programs like Aspen and RemindMe, for checking grades and receiving communications, respectively.

**STEPHANIE:** I feel that *there's a higher volume, the interaction between [parents and] the BPNC staff than teachers*, that's why that's something they want to work on . . . You know, just like when we did the Earth Day, that was a Saturday and [the teachers are] probably like, why do I want to come back? It's time to decompress from the whole week. I understand that. So I mean, *that's where we're trying to brainstorm to see how they can build that*. I know they do use this app, I believe it's called RemindMe to try to communicate with parents. I know in other ways emailing, but the other thing is a lot of our parents may not know how to use that technology or have an email, right? So I know one of the things that we did from one of my workshops was to make sure um, parents are signed up for Aspen, where they're able to check their child's grades and then to make sure the people that that came to the workshop are signed up for Aspen and then they're on RemindMe.

The ease of the RemindMe app was also discussed by Elizabeth, discussing how it helped her to stay in the loop with the classroom happenings despite not having time to create personal relationships with teachers and administrators due to the demands of being a single working mother. Especially for those parents who want to reach teachers for important academic matters but don't have time for deeper, more personal school-day engagement, these programs were particularly important for supporting their childrens' education.

When possible, BPNC employees discussed also enjoying engaging teachers and administrators in programming, or directing programming in ways so that parents were able to support teachers and administrators. I saw this firsthand at an Earth Day event at BPE, where the principal was present and interacting with parents, helping to plant new plants around the front of the school alongside many parents and children. Carmen also discussed how at Burroughs they not only tried to engage teachers, but also tried to organize events to express their appreciation for the teachers as parents.

**CARMEN:** I definitely was very much involved with the staff at the school. I still remember the principal at the time. *All the staff knew who I was. All the staff knew who my children were.*

They were all there since pre-k and graduated from there. So they were all very much in contact, even up till now some of the teachers I still keep in touch with through social media. But I was very, very involved. I liked to organize events for them and appreciation events. Like, for example, for Teacher's Day, I would do potlucks with the teachers and parents. We renovated a park nearby with teachers as well, so *I liked to include the teachers with us.*

By holding this programming for parents to help out and support teachers, not only are teachers supported and assisted, but parents are able to develop comfort and connection with these teachers and administrators who they may not generally feel comfortable approaching. This programming helps to create a broader teacher-parent community, and one which supports further collaboration and mutual support.

For many parents, institutional spaces in the school could also prove to be crucial spaces for their voices to be heard so that the needs of their families could be met, and community schools programming provided an important avenue into these spaces. Maria discussed how she saw that Latino parents, and migrant parents in particular, felt unsafe speaking out in school spaces. This was one of the great strengths that she found being involved in Parent University, was the encouragement to get involved in the school and to speak out for their particular needs.

**MARIA:** I think those at the Miss Navarro Parent University do a great job because *they are trying to involve parents more.* We are the parents, the ones who sometimes don't go, I don't know what their fears are for not expressing themselves so as not to get involved in the well-being of their children, but Richards at least is doing a great job. They are growing little by little, they want to implement more courses so that parents are involved so that parents also grow along with their children. And I repeat, they do an excellent job because it feels like a home. Not only a place where you go and learn, but a place where you socialize and where you feel support. I think that little by little they will improve as others have more resources, but so far they are going very well.

Maria didn't just encourage parents to get involved – she acted on it. When we spoke, she had just been elected to the Local School Council (LSC), an impressive feat for someone who had only been in the country a few years, which was part of her own mission to speak up and express the needs she saw in the families around her. Being involved in these institutional spaces, Maria



found that administrators wanted to support her and her children, but simply didn't know how because the parents hadn't been speaking up out of fear of deportation.

**MARIA:** It's worth highlighting that the principal was very open even though she doesn't speak Spanish, but she is very open to be able to receive parents. It's just that *it is the parents' fear*, that is why it is not the school's fault, but rather the parents, who put obstacles in place for themselves and many times they do not support.

She believed that parents were the ones limiting the school's ability to meet their needs, and she noted that, even though Parent University was doing a great job encouraging parents to speak up, it was nonetheless the space where she saw the most continued need for support from her perspective being newly elected to the LSC.

**MARIA:** I think *they should encourage parents to participate a little more*. Because this way the principal herself would know the needs. Many times parents stay silent because they are afraid, they won't say it, so I think there should be more conferences in which they can explain that it doesn't matter, your immigration status does not matter. *The important thing is that your voice is heard so that it helps contribute to the improvement.*

As someone who had found ways to make her voice heard, and gotten strong results, Maria has made it her mission to encourage and help other Latino and migrant parents to be heard. By supporting and encouraging parents' involvement in these intimidating bureaucratic spaces, even those who approached the programming as a *skill-builder*, community schools in Brighton Park were able to make sure that parents could make their own needs heard and find support in the school itself.

Many parents faced barriers to involvement with the school, which were eased by the community school's integration of parent programming with the physical space of the school. By creating opportunities for parents to be engaged and even employed in the school, ensuring parents were enrolled in and understood school information systems, and supporting and involving teachers and administrators through special events. All of this made the school space more accessible, particularly for parents with limited ability or comfort with being involved in

the school. These parents in particular needed their voices heard in the school community and its decision-making processes, as they might otherwise be overlooked. As a result, for many parents, BPNC programming provided an important inroad to the school itself and to the relationships and resources they needed to make sure that their families and children are seen and supported.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have shown how, for many parents, BPNC's parent programming created social capital networks that facilitated resource acquisition in ways that might not have otherwise been accessible. I have shown how, in many ways, this process does end up selecting for a certain demographic, namely Latina stay-at-home mothers, as a result of who has the time to be engaged and who is culturally and linguistically most represented in programming. For these individuals, BPNC's programming creates a community in which some intentionally network, but many do not, seeking socialization or skill-building supports instead. Even those who initially sought out a specific resource or were simply drawn by a sense of community found themselves inadvertently integrated into a vast network of resources that, for many, ultimately transformed the course of their lives. By providing the conditions for sustained and consistent interaction in cooperative environments, BPNC facilitated a transformation of social capital for these parents (Small 2009). For many parents, this occupied much if not all of their day outside of the home, operating as a sort of "total institution" which ordered their life and connections (*Ibid.*). I have shown how, despite various styles of engagement, BPNC uses incentives and pro-social norms to encourage community members to build and activate social capital across engagement styles. As a result, engaged parents and community members are funneled into a

vast social capital network that helps to ease pathways to support and improve the lives of the individuals involved.

This thesis contributes to the broader literature on social capital in schools, emphasizing the potential for community-based nonprofit organizations to establish pro-social norms and social capital networks through school reform. Many Latinos in the US face unique linguistic and cultural barriers to mainstream social capital (Rosa 2019). The immigration status of many Brighton Park residents further marginalizes them, and particularly for single mothers, working-class background can limit both the resources accessible and the time available for them to navigate new bureaucratic and social environments that might hold important resources. This thesis provides a context-specific case in which, through the creation of pro-social norms and community spaces, much like one might see in religious schools where people attend many of the same institutions such as a church (Coleman 1988), community schools were able to create strong bonds and networks within the community. Furthermore, the institutional connections that BPNC possessed provided access to resources beyond the community, helping parents to realize their goals beyond the boundaries of Brighton Park. Brighton Park and BPNC present a case where, through extensive organizational resource networks and powerful community bonds, social capital networks were able to thrive and support many parents, particularly stay-at-home Latina mothers who were involved in regular parent programming, to access life-saving resources and achieve their goals.

As community schools work continues to expand within Chicago and nationally, it is important to emphasize several key takeaways from this study, informed by my informants' own advice. These recommendations are that community schools (1) carefully consider what groups are most engaged and why, so that these gaps can be bridged and addressed, especially for

working parents and parents from marginalized backgrounds; (2) devise pro-social norms that encourage all parents to develop connections with others and with resources, so that parents are socially engaged regardless of individual differences and engagement styles; (3) embrace transparency in norms and rules around resource accessibility, so as to avoid confusion and frustration for resource-seeking parents; and (4) ensure that nonprofit partners are staffed with people actively engaged in the community, and who are able to actively cultivate their own social capital networks in their work. My outline of these guidelines is not intended to suggest that this did not occur in Brighton Park – in fact, I think that in many ways it was a model of strong community engagement and pro-social network building. However, these were the takeaways that many parents shared, and they are among what I’m sure are many aspects of successful community schools, and ones which should be replicated to the extent possible in the various contexts in which community schools are implemented in the future.

While this research offers a novel qualitative and ethnographic glimpse into the workings of parental social capital in and around community schools, it possesses several important limitations. Among these are the fact that the scope of the study is limited, as the extent of ethnographic data collection cannot allow for total characterization of the organizational field and the 25 unique individuals who responded to the survey and/or interview do not construct a significant enough sample of the Brighton Park parental community to make any strong quantitative claims. Thus, this study is limited to its role as a record of parents’ individual experiences and perspectives, as well as an analysis of why specific parents seem to differ in certain respects. By no means is this an exhaustive account of how parents engaged. Furthermore, as an outsider and an individual with limited Spanish proficiency, my ability to study this community was limited in key ways. However, this meant that community members

involved me by choice – much of what was shared to me was shared directly, and thus I felt very transparent in my role and purpose as a researcher in this space.

Future research should continue to use qualitative data to understand the operations of community schools. In particular, deeper study of parents not embedded or partially embedded in parent programming would be useful to understand precisely what the impact of this programming was for my respondents. Additionally, a comparative study that contrasts social capital networks in a traditional public school as opposed to a community school could be useful in determining how the community school model in particular shapes the public school experience. My research has provided a model by which future studies can take into account parental perspectives in research on the community school model, and future research should continue to include this method to really understand the situation on the ground beyond quantitative benchmarks. Through further research, both quantitative and qualitative, the multiplicative power of social capital in the community school setting can be better understood, providing stronger context-specific guidelines that can be used to implement and improve the program as it continues to grow and expand nationally.

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