



Parents appraise schools: A study of counter-narratives



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ABSTRACT

We examine the counter-narratives parents tell about their children's literacy development and their involvement with schools. Situated in the contested terrain of parental involvement, we ask: When parents tell counter-narratives, what structure and topic do they take? We conducted interviews with thirty-one parents whose children struggled with reading or writing. Drawing on the tools of narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis, we identified five different kinds of counter-narratives. The counter-narratives are diverse in thematic focus and grammatical structure. They vary in how they couple critique with action, alternate vision, acceptance or an emerging counter-narrative. We define each type of counter-narrative, give a representative example and identify the discursive features associated with each type. In the discussion we present an expanded notion of counter-narratives that foregrounds the epistemic privilege of parents.

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Introduction

In this study we examine the counter-narratives parents tell about their children's literacy development and their involvement with schools. As expressions of lived reality, counter-narratives privilege the perspectives of those who have been marginalized and, as such, contribute to new bodies of knowledge (e.g. Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Fernandez, 2002). We use the term counter-narratives to signal the ways in which parents resist and transform the practices and identities designated to them and their children through normative educational practices. While other research has shown that parents may resist school-based efforts and even create different alternatives (Auerbach, 2007; Warren & Mapp, 2011), we more deeply analyze the discursive contours of such counter-narratives. Specifically, we asked: When parents tell counter-narratives, what structure and topic do they take? To foreshadow our findings, we identified five different kinds of counter-narratives. While not formulaic, each counter-narrative includes identifiable dimensions that signal a particular kind of story.

Theoretical frameworks and related literature review

Parental involvement as contested terrain

Parental involvement is often pointed to as the missing link in student achievement. Yet, parental involvement as confirmed by a meta-analysis of programs conducted by Jeynes (2012) continues to be defined in school-sanctioned ways. Indeed, shared reading, checking homework and teacher–parent communications were the practices cited as resulting in increased student achievement. While these stock stories capture mainstream attention about parental involvement, there

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are alternate narratives that include a broader set of parental experiences and practices (Allen, 2007; Auerbach, 2007; Rogers, 2002; Compton-Lilly, 2007; Dorner, 2010; Edwards, 1999; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Compton-Lilly (2007), for example, in a longitudinal study of family literacy practices shows that while parents may not be involved in school-sanctioned ways because of work schedules or bad experiences with school, they are still involved with their children's education. Mainstream narratives fail to explain the involvement of parents whose children experience difficulty with literacy. These parents often operate on the margins of schools, seeking out best practices for their children. They face a double bind of needing to prove their quality and quantity of their involvement to avoid being cast as the reason for the difficulty. But they often have to move beyond traditional forms of involvement to advocate for the instructional conditions they deem necessary for their child.

A number of scholars offer a more critical look at the assumptions underlying narratives of parental involvement. Scholars point out the gendered nature of parental involvement, what has been referred to as “mothering work” and the invisible work that is presumed by the school (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Luttrell, 1996; Pitt, 2002; Prins & Wilson Toso, 2008; Standing, 1999). These authors demonstrate how parental involvement initiatives often assume: mothers are responsible for educational outcomes that parents have equal access to resources and while parents need to be involved in their children's education, they will have little impact on institutional or systemic decisions.

Scholarship on counter-narratives

Counter-narratives generate knowledge by privileging the perspectives and insights of those who have been marginalized and silenced within educational institutions. The concept of counter-narratives is interdisciplinary and comes from narrative research (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004); law (Delgado, 1995); critical race theory (Fernandez, 2002; Solórazano & Yosso, 2002); critical psychology (Fine & Weis, 2003) and post-modern theory (e.g. Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 1995).

Grounded in critical race theory (CRT), Solórazano and Yosso (2002) make a case that counter-stories express the lived realities of marginalized people whose voices are not often heard. They assert multiple functions for counter stories (a) they can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a familiar face to education theory and practice, (b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand established belief systems, (c) they can demonstrate that people are not alone in their position, and (d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, “one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone” (p. 37).

Solórazano and Yosso (2002) focus their analysis on racialized experiences that are often silenced. They point out that researchers who are sensitized to these stories can create “composite characters” (p. 34) to illuminate elements of critical race theory. Counter-narratives, in this tradition, include the premises of CRT: (1) race, racism, gender, and class are central factors in individuals' lives, (2) dominant ideologies should be challenged because their privilege silences people and distorts their way of being, (3) experiential knowledge is central for understanding racism, (4) transdisciplinary knowledge is important to understand the effects of subordination. Counter-narratives in this tradition focus on stories that name, challenge, resist and subvert racism.

Grounded in social psychology, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) extend the reach of counter-narratives to include oppression and dominant expectations more broadly. These expectations, or dominant narratives “are not automatically hegemonic” (p. 360). Rather, the rehearsal of these dominant narratives through daily interactions makes them oppressive. Different than the theorization of counter-narratives in critical race theory, social psychologists attend to the discursive resources that interactively establish a story line. Narratives, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) argue, are vehicles through which people make assertions about identities across space and time. People depict their lives in interaction with others with whom they may have conflicts or alliances, and the telling of this interaction might vary according to whom the person is telling their story. As a result, interpretations are being laid out in assertions, “revealing the speaker's identity” (p.358). Thus, analytic focus in this tradition attends to both the evaluation of storylines and the interactions between speakers and listeners.

Conceptions of counter-narratives in empirical research

Counter-narratives emerge from groups of people who experience oppression and live on the margins. Researchers have spent time examining the narratives of garment workers in Delhi (Lal, 2011), African American male undergraduate students at predominantly White colleges and universities (Harper, 2009), adolescents (Polvere, 2011; Rolón-Dow, 2005) Latina mothers concerned about morality and dignity (Delgado, 1994; Villenas, 2001), teachers in urban settings (Milner, 2008), women who experience fibromyalgia (Sallinen, Kukkurainen, Peltokallio, Mikkelsen, & Anderberg, 2012), mothers whose children are identified as disabled (Fisher & Goodey, 2007; Rogers, 2002) and parents who resist high stakes testing (Freeman, Mathison, & Wilcox, 2006). In all of the studies, counter-narratives generate knowledge by granting epistemic privilege to the experiences and perspectives of those who have been silenced within educational institutions (Collins, 1998; Harding, 1991).

Rolón-Dow (2005), for example, explores the intersection between ethnicity and care in the education of nine Puerto Rican adolescents over two years. Findings focus on the extent to which narratives circulating at the school include care distributed across ethnic lines. Interestingly, the author identifies what they refer to as an “emerging caring counternarrative”

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