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Jean Anyon with Michael J. Dumas, Darla Linville, Kathleen Nolan, Madeline Pérez, Eve Tuck, and Jen Weiss

Theory and Educational Research

Toward Critical Social Explanation

Jean Anyon

with Michael J. Dumas, Darla Linville, Kathleen Nolan, Madeline Pérez, Eve Tuck, and Jen Weiss

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CHAPTER 5

Low-income Latina Parents, School Choice, and Pierre Bourdieu

MADELINE PÉREZ

On a cold evening in December 2006, hundreds of New York City parents gathered at the offices of Governor-elect Elliot Spitzer to deliver written pleas by public school students for better middle schools and a more equitable high school admissions process. Although the protest had an air of holiday cheer, the families of the students were chanting—not cheering.

> *Jingle bells, jingle bells*
> *Jingle all the way,*
> *All we want is good schools*
> *So our children can gradu-ate.*[1]

The protest was led by parent members of the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ)—a collaborative effort of 12 community groups and unions representing tens of thousands of New York City parents. The group was organizing to end inequities in the city's educational system. On this December day, a top demand was for the creation of a position of Deputy Chancellor to revamp the public high school choice process, during which a hundred thousand eighth grades vie for spots in nine elite and hundreds of other high schools.

It is not difficult to understand why parents wanted changes in the high school admissions process. Two years earlier Schools Chancellor Joel Klein had stated during a press conference that "Eighty-six percent of the high schools in New York City are undesirable" (Herszenhorn, 2004). That so

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many schools were deemed inadequate would have been of concern to any New York parent—but felt even more urgently by low-income parents of color, most of whom could not exit the public school system into expensive private schools. Moreover, there had been evidence of ugly racial steering in the New York City schools, in which researchers documented widespread practices as a result of which white parents were informed of gifted programs available to their children, while Black and Latino parents were not (ACORN, 1996, 1997, 1998; Center for Immigrant Families, 2005; see also Brantlinger, 2003).

The parents demonstrating knew that people of color are often excluded from educational opportunities by virtue of their race and working-class or poor status. And multiple studies have shown that low-income Black and Latino students are overrepresented in special education classes, poorly resourced schools, general-equivalency degree programs (GED), and as high school dropouts or push-outs (see Fine, 1991 and Kozol, 2005, among many others). These students are also underrepresented in honors and advanced placement classes, college prep programs, and colleges and universities (Oakes, 1985; Lucas, 1999; Auerbach, 2002). One important educational opportunity that is sometimes available to low-income parents, however, is when children and families can choose the district school which the child will attend—especially important being high school choice (Price and Stern, 1987; Wells, 1993; Willie and Alvez, 1996; McGroarty, 2001; Scott, 2005).

As Noguera and Wing point out, high school is the last opportunity for young people to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to achieve life goals (2006). "It is the final destination for all students who make it to the ninth grade, and it is the place where future trajectories—to Ivy league colleges, to state and community colleges, to dead-end jobs, or to prison—are determined" (15). Aware from experience that the well-paying manufacturing jobs formerly available had all but disappeared (see Anyon, 2005), the parents demonstrating in December 2006 understood that their children needed college degrees; and they wanted the district to improve its capacity to educate students well enough for them to attend college.

Choice in New York City

The New York City Department of Education describes its high school application process as one of "choice and equity" (NYC Department of Education, 2005). However, the low-income Latina parents I worked with in my ten years of community organizing knew that race and class often entered into the selection process to disadvantage them. Research was in congruence with their understandings. Studies by ACORN, a national and local community-based organization, documented a high degree of exclusion of

students of color from the district's elite high schools. ACORN found in 1998, for example, that although the NYC district was 39 percent Black and 34 percent Latino, the student body of the elite Stuyvesant High was less than five percent Black and four percent Hispanic. At Bronx Science High School, fewer than 11 percent of students were Black and nine percent Hispanic (1998). (By 2006, the percentage of Black students at Stuyvesant had dropped to 2.2 percent [Gootman, 2006].) ACORN researchers also discovered that the majority of students who attended the city's elite high schools in the late 1990s came from only three of the city's many districts (1996).

Other studies described practices that prevented Black and Latino students in New York City from exercising choice. In 2005, the Center for Immigrant Families, a parent organizing group, documented that in District 3, under a choice plan where parents and students were to chose a middle school, office personnel and administrators in some schools encountered by low income parents of color were dismissive or insulting, and frequently provided information that was erroneous and that prevented parents of color from applying to that school (2006). In response to this and other research—and to parent organizing efforts—the city was moved to implement a policy reform in District 3 that addressed the racial and economic inequalities in that district's schools (ibid.).

Questions that guided the project I report in this chapter include the following: How can low-income parents and children of color negotiate a choice program in an environment where race and class exclusionary practices influence the process? How is school choice operationalized for those whose schedule inflexibility (from, say, multiple jobs, language unfamiliarity, or lack of information) deny them access? What are the schooling options for students who do not successfully navigate the complex admissions process? And what are the conditions that enable families to challenge central office allocations?

A Participatory Action Project

In order to think about these questions with some of the Latina parents I had been working with as a community organizer, I asked them to join me in researching and creating a handbook for parents that would describe all the high school options. Over a period of six months we worked together to research the schools. We made joint decisions about the content and design of the guide. The book we produced provided an overview of the city's high school admissions process, presented findings about what low-income families want in a high school, and gave detailed information about each school. This handbook described the public high school admissions process through a parent's perspective. We made it available city-wide.

In order to prepare material for the book, parents and I engaged in three main activities. First, the parents shared their successes and struggles in navigating Board of Education bureaucratic processes (I discuss these in some detail below). Second, we created profiles of each high school by visiting them, observing classes, and interviewing school staff, students, and families. This allowed us to describe each school in the voices of parents, the main stakeholders, instead of as bundles of statistics, which was the format of district descriptions. Third, parents and I created and disseminated a survey to families of all high schools. Parents were provided with training on how to create a survey and how to analyze the data we obtained. To make the guide attractive and reflective of the communities it sought to serve, we recruited the talents of James De La Vega, a Nuyorican artist and educator, who illustrated the book.

My decision to shape the guide as a participatory action project led by parents was informed by Pierre Bourdieu's theories of social and cultural capital—specifically his view that high-status social networks and cultural knowledge and skills are valued and therefore useful in social interactions with bureaucratic and other social institutions. The parents in my group, who had grown up in poor and immigrant families, did not possess these networks or skills, and I thought they might profit from understanding the power of, and acquiring some of, these attributes (Noguera, 2003). As a doctoral student, I was reading many theories, and was struck by Giroux's edict to "take theory to the people" (1983). I thought that Bourdieu's concepts or "thinking tools" as he described them, might be useful to the parents in their educational advocacy work.

Indeed, it pained me to me to hear the mothers—many of whom had spent long hours trying to deal with their children's teachers and school administrators—blame themselves and their children's lack of success on their own previous educational inadequacies or their children's behavior and alleged linguistic and other deficits.

Following sections of this chapter delineate Bourdieu's theoretical constructs, describe how I shared his theory with parents, and offer evidence that knowledge of the power of activated high-status social and cultural capital assisted the parents in more systemic, structural understanding of the admissions process and the way it worked. In some cases their new knowledge allowed the parents to act more efficaciously as their children's advocate. Indeed, I learned from the parents during our time together. Discussing high-level theory with people who had not encountered it before broadened and deepened my own understanding of Bourdieu's work, and affirmed my respect for the nascent theories parents had already developed.

Cultural and Social Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's notions of social and cultural capital have been fruitful constructions for scholars exploring family–school relations (e.g., Reay, 1998; Noguera, 2001; Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Andre-Bechely, 2005). For Bourdieu, capital includes resources that are invested and utilized in hopes of achieving a certain goal. For my purposes, his (1983) descriptions of economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital were useful. Economic capital of course, involves financial and material possessions one owns. One important distinction Bourdieu makes is that he sees all symbolic capital as disguised economic capital. "Economic capital is at the root for all the other types of capital, including social capital." And, "every type of capital is reducible in the last analysis to economic capital" (252). Bourdieu used cultural and social capital as lenses with which to explain the educational success of children of various social classes:

> The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success, i.e. the specifics profits [*sic*] which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the class and class fractions. (243)

Cultural capital as advanced by Bourdieu is defined as relatively rare, high-status cultural and linguistic knowledge, skills, and dispositions passed from one generation to the next. An important note is that these dispositions consisted of a set of dispositions and competencies legitimated and valued by dominant strata of society. Bourdieu saw cultural capital as existing in three main forms: in the embodied state (in the form of long-lasting habits of mind and body); in the form of cultural goods (certain kinds of art work, literature, or sculpture); and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification, as certificates and degrees (ibid.). Educational researcher Annette Lareau finds that Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital "has the potential to show how individual biography intersects with social structure, a potential that theoretical and empirical work must take advantage of" (1989, 179). The concept of cultural capital is useful for researching families' relationships with schools, because educators tend to perceive the cultural capital of those who control the economic, social, and political resources as the "natural and proper sort"; thus they favor students (and families) who posses the cultural forms of the dominant groups (Harker, 1984). Cultural capital is a relational concept and cannot be understood in isolation

from other forms of capital that constitute advantage and disadvantage in society.

Bourdieu defined social capital as "the mobilization of actual or potential resources, which are linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, membership in a group. [Social capital] is made up of social obligations or connections" (1983, 248). Economist Nan Lin clarified for me that social capital can include two types of resources an individual can gain access to and use—personal resources and social resources (1982, 21). Lin sees personal resources as "resources possessed by an individual and may include ownership of material as well as symbolic goods [e.g., cultural capital]." Examples of these include academic credentials and/or degrees. On the other hand, he defines social resources as those "accessed through an individual's social connections" (ibid.). Thus, social and cultural capital can be exchanged for each other and for economic or other gain.

James Coleman pointed to ways actors attempt to control social and cultural capital resources in which they have an interest—for example, as education researcher Ellen Brantlinger found, in a district in which middle-class parents mobilize to ensure that school choice programs exclude lower-income families of color (2003). Sometimes, in order for individuals to gain interest from the outcome of an event, actors participate in exchanges or transfers of resources (Coleman, 1990, 302). Bourdieu describes this as members in a group gaining a "credit" which provides the backing of the collectively owned capital in the group. Research supports the notion that parents' social capital—specifically leading to collaborations between teachers and families—plays a role in producing high achievement of children (Lareau, 2003; Noguera, 2004).

Valenzuela (1999), Noguera (2001), and Stanton-Salazar (2001) recognize that poor people have their own social and cultural capital. These authors describe the networks and cultural resources that low-income urban parents and residents of color create and utilize as they negotiate to good effect in their community environments. As Valenzuela points out, however, although the low-income Mexican families she worked with did have access to forms of capital that facilitated their activity in their social circles, these resources were no match for the exclusionary tracking practices and deficit discourses in the schools their children attended. The unequal playing field of types of cultural and social capital haunted me as I worked with parents over ten years of education organizing. And it played a major role in my decision to take Bourdieu to the people I worked with.

Using Bourdieu to Talk with Parents about School Choice

I spent the second weekend of March 2007 in a conference room at a local public college with the ten parent advisory committee members of the Parent Guide project. Before I could tap into the expertise of these parent leaders and relate it to Bourdieu's ideas, I needed to create the conditions where parents felt comfortable sharing their experiences with formal schooling. Then we could explore what information they felt needed to be included in the parent guide and explore Bourdieu's notions of capital as a lens through which to view their experiences navigating school bureaucracy and public school choice. I wanted Bourdieu's work to confirm and extend insights the parents already had developed as they had negotiated school bureaucracies.

Despite the fact that the women on the advisory committee had long advocated for their children (in both successful and unsuccessful ways), most of them had a difficult time believing that they had valuable expertise or knowledge. Research has documented low-income parents' feelings of inadequacy, sometimes leading to their adopting a passive role and leaving education decisions to the schools (Liontos, 1992; Christenson and Hirsh, 1998, among others). Christenson and Hirsh emphasize how educational jargon or "teacher talk" often dominates low-income parent/teacher conversations, and facilitates the passivity of such parents.

In order to ensure that the parents would be active agents in the weekend retreat, I invited an educational researcher and a bilingual school teacher who shared racial and class attributes of the parents to share the first day of the retreat with us. I wanted these visitors to demystify scholarship as well as public school teaching, and to engage parents in conversation about what constitutes knowledge and expertise. The speakers shared stories of their own childhood growing up in low-income immigrant neighborhoods, and highlighted important educational moments on their journeys to higher education. Working with this researcher and teacher also created a situation in which transmission of academic cultural capital from the professionals to the parents could occur.

I asked parents to reflect on and share their own educational memories—positive or negative—and to tell us how they think their own educational experiences might have shaped what they wanted for their children's education. To stimulate their thoughts, parents took part in what participatory action researcher Michelle Fine calls "The Writing's on the Wall" (personal communication, March 23, 2006). During this exercise the parents were asked to write their stories, fears, misconceptions, and questions about high school admissions on huge pieces of chart paper that covered all the walls in our conference room.

The women shared positive stories ("My child's teachers helped me and my child with high school choice. I felt supported"), questions and

confusions ("Are there zoned high schools or not? I don't understand the process and no one has answers for me"), and negative experiences ("When I tried to tell the guidance counselor about my child's strengths and abilities, she told me to leave the decisions to the professionals"). Parents also shared memories of their own childhood, being praised and protected by teachers, as well as painful misunderstandings in interactions with educators.

Negative experiences were most common. In fact, I heard a flood of anecdotes about exclusion and injustice while interacting with the public schools. I used the concepts of social and cultural capital to provide explanations for their bitter experience. "The right networks, knowing the people in charge, or being acquainted with their friends and colleagues are how white middle- and upper-middle-class parents can get their children in." "Our accents, the way we dress, our inflection: everything alerts school personnel to who we are and what they think our kids will be like. And they want students who have parents with money to buy art supplies for the school; they want kids who they think will score high on the standardized tests."

We also talked about what we had learned from our research for the parent guide in terms of cultural and social capital. One conversation centered on the mothers' observation of classrooms during our school visits. The mothers had been made painfully aware of the differences in the "hidden curriculum" in various schools (Anyon, 1980). These seemed to differ by the race and socio-economic status of the students, and it provided an opportunity for further discussion of the power of social and cultural capital. For example, in one school where all the students were Latino and Black and 92 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, teachers seemed to have very little patience when students were disruptive. Parent committee members observed a teacher yell at a student for 20 minutes because he spoke out of turn in class. Matilde stated, "I found it strange that the teacher was so upset by the student taking away two minutes of class time when he spoke out of turn and responded by yelling to the point were she then eliminated 20 minutes of instructional time. I don't think the student heard what she was saying. Her tone said, 'I hate you.'"

Later in the week, Matilde visited another school with a student population that was more economically and racially mixed, with a preponderance of middle-class Caucasian students. She reported that, "A boy was shouting in class. The teacher ignored him, but praised him right away when he engaged with the class again. Afterwards, she asked the student if everything was OK. It turned out that he was having a bad day and shared that with her. That boy probably heard, 'I care' from the teacher." Parent guide members had not visited upper-middle white classrooms before, and had not observed how teachers handled such students. After our visits they concurred with

Bourdieu that schools do seem to reward students and their families who possess certain embodied cultural capital attributes and penalize others who have different attributes.

The parent stories and my own "structural anecdotes"—in which I described their stories so that they were seen as "incidents in which the key structural elements are revealed"—demonstrated to the parents how "institutional and organizational forces converge around what on the surface may appear to be an individual, personal or idiosyncratic matter" (Duster, 1989). I was also able to employ the structural anecdotes provided by parents and our discussion of "The Writing's on the Wall" to facilitate conversations about the themes of high-status social and cultural capital as facilitating parent–school interactions.

To take our discussion further into Bourdieu's emphasis on the power of elite social networks, I asked the parents who had already gone through the high school admissions process with their children to tell us from whom they had gotten information they needed, and who had given them the most helpful information. It became clear that in most cases school personnel had not been helpful. We discussed how the neighborhood or country where one was a child, where one lives now, the job one has, and where one attended school (or not) strongly affect what people become a part of your social networks. These are the people who you contact when you need information. Yvette, the only parent who was a professional (a lawyer—and whose social capital therefore included high-status acquaintances), shared how she obtained information and strategized about the high school admissions process for her sons.

> My husband and I reached out to our law school colleagues when it was time to think about applying to high schools. They were able to introduce us to their own kids who were alumni from [elite] schools in the city such as Stuyvesant and Hunter. One of the parents was involved in the state-wide campaign for better school funding, as well. Because of this she knew many of the principals. We got our advice from these people and they told us what we needed to do.

Yvette's possession and activation of social capital was very different from Hilda's, who as a recently arrived immigrant from the Dominican Republic did not have the networks to orient her in how to make choices or how to navigate the bureaucracy. She was not able to obtain helpful information about the admissions process from officials, nor did her friends have the information she sought; she was forced to rely on the occasional letters her son brought home from school. Hilda shared that, in her homeland of the Dominican Republic, teachers are viewed as extended family—a second set

of parents for the child. Therefore, families demonstrate their trust for the teacher and their involvement in the education of their child by *deferring* to the teacher. She told us that because of her trust in the education process in her country, when she came here and her daughter was going through the application process, she tended to accept "the luck of the draw" in what school she was assigned (see also Calabrese Barton *et al.*, 2004). Other parents concurred that, though they took part in demonstrations and protests, they too had often accepted their child's placements without question—"*esa es la que le toca*" ("that's the one he/she gets"). Hearing the lawyer-parent's experiences as she described her powerful networks and strategies cemented for the other parents an understanding of the importance of race and social status in a process of ostensibly equal choice. Yvette shared with us a chart she and her husband had constructed to help them decipher differences between the schools (Table 5.1).

We contrasted the difference between Hilda's and some of the others' responses to Yvette's mobilization of her lawyer friends and the chart she had created, and parents agreed that she had engaged powerful cultural skills and social networks. She provided a model for the parents. Annette Lareau (2003) found that middle- and upper-middle-class parents, like Yvette, typically utilize social networks and cultural skills to advocate for their children and, for example, rarely hesitate to challenge an educator's decision around what is best for their children. Lareau describes the resulting "personalized education" middle-class children receive, and contrasts this to the "generic education" that working-class and poor families receive. I discussed this research with the parents.

In spite of occasional unwillingness to challenge educator decisions, several of the parents had developed their own theories about why interaction with the schools was difficult. Laura, for example, a recently arrived Latina immigrant from Colombia, had previously theorized the power of social capital. She said she had described her experience navigating public school choice in New York by telling others that she knew she might have problems because "Yo no tengo padrino aqui" ("I do not have a godfather here"). Maria sympathized. She said she had explained to her husband the treatment she had received from district officials in terms of *power.* "I went over there to ask about transferring my daughter, and they ignored me. They knew I had no power, I was somebody they didn't care about. They knew nothing would happen to them if they ignored me. They probably threw it [my daughter's application] away."

As I write this chapter, a full year has elapsed since the creation of the parent guide and my weekend with the parents. I have recently reunited with them—as they are now serving as the parent advisory committee for my dissertation on the NYC high school admissions process. During our reunion

TABLE 5.1 Notes about schools we are interested in:

Characteristics that are important	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
Location				
Distance/travel time (Within borough? Near bus/train?)				
How long has the school been in existence?				
Size of school				
Number of students per class				
Student–teacher ratio/student–guidance counselor ratio				
Student support services				
Where do most teachers get their training?				
Is there a test requirement for applying?				
If so, is there a cost for the test?				
Deadline for test application/test date				
Specialization (art, music, dance, etc.)				
How diverse is the school? (students, teachers, curriculum)				
School tour—date of tour				
Is an interview required? If so, when?				
Are there tuition costs or any other fees?				
If there are tuition costs or fees, does the school offer scholarships?				
What is the school's graduation rate?				
What are some of the colleges that students attend after graduation?				
What is the "feel" of the building?				
Does the school share space with other schools?				
If so, are the schools able to do this in a mutually beneficial way?				
Other deadlines/factors				
Overall impression of the school—score 1 through 10				

meeting, I asked for their thoughts on the production of the guide and our "theory" retreat. It became apparent that the use of Bourdieu's theorizations over the weekend of our time together—and the experience of researching and writing the school guide—had sharpened parents' understanding of the system, and in several cases had improved their advocacy practices.

Several stated that producing the guide and discussing social and cultural capital empowered them as researchers and advocates, providing them with the confidence to question their child's teachers and school principals in ways they had not before. Matilde described how she had shared with other parents in her neighborhood the chart that Yvette had made. Another parent took Bourdieu's notions further, extending them into an acknowledgement of the value in the capital that families and children in her working-class Latino neighborhood held. She decided to pursue a career in a Bronx school as a parent advocate. "I realized that I have a lot of social capital with the families in the school. And I know about high-status capital now. I can serve as a bridge between the school and the parents. This makes me a valuable resource in ways I didn't realize before."

The mothers also reported that as a result of our weekend retreat they were better able to problematize the limitations of "choice" in a city where 86 percent of the schools are deemed undesirable by district leaders. They saw that, if their children did not get accepted at a good school, reasons might inhere in the inadequacies of the school system rather than in their culture or their children's inadequacies.

And I learned a lot, as well. I understood in a concrete manner that theory can be a tool for the empowerment of poor and working-class people. I saw that it was possible to extend parents' insights, to strengthen their resolve, and to improve their capacities by offering them high-status knowledge that mirrored and magnified their own.

Note

1 Thanks to Educational Justice Organizer Milli Bonilla for sharing the parent chants with me.

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Personal Reflection

My Relationship with Theory

For years, I resisted scholarship, theory, and doctoral studies. Despite encouragement from professors in undergraduate Psychology and Masters of Social Work programs, I refused. After all, I was making a much bigger contribution to society by pursuing a career as a community organizer than I would as a detached, disconnected scholar. I felt I was most useful working with the people in low-income neighborhoods in New York City and Oakland, California. We carried out political campaigns around affordable housing, ending domestic violence, access to affordable healthcare and pharmaceuticals, and school reform. Together, residents, parents, and I felt that we were influencing policy, increasing the skills and confidence of people in the community, and sparking public awareness of problems that prevent equity and social justice.

Some of the concrete outcomes of our campaigns included construction of a new school building for Cypress Hills Community School, a dual-language parent-led school in Brooklyn, NY; the involvement of local elected New York City officials in proposing policies that better protect survivors of domestic violence from their attackers; a bilingual guide to school admissions designed and written by parents; and a commitment from several landlords in Park Slope, Brooklyn, that despite their right to demand market rents, they would not displace long-time residents.

Although I knew that it was important to document the work we were doing, and to embed such activity in a larger framework of thought about issues of social change, I didn't believe that scholarship or theory made much of a difference in the world. And carrying out research on people I worked