Por los míos: Mothers Pursuing Educational Justice for their Children Pre and During COVID

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Abstract:

This piece illustrates some of the practices/discourses enacted by four displaced Puerto Rican mothers as they strived to support the academic success of their children in the receiving Pennsylvania public school system. The study, couched in Critical Pedagogy and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), documents (a) the ways mothers supported and advocated for their children as culturally and linguistically diverse students pre- and during a global pandemic, and (b) how challenges that predated the pandemic complicated the transition to online learning.

Laura woke up at 7:00 am and made breakfast for her son, eight-year-old Mikael. She woke him at around 8:30 am, knowing he would only get out of bed after much cajoling on her part. After breakfast, they would both sit at the computer in his room, and Laura would make sure her son had all the online resources he needed for the school day open and easily accessible. Laura worried about Mikael's ability to follow the teacher's online instructions. Educators labeled her son as having special needs. The fact he was a Spanish speaker in an English-only program only added another level of complexity to an already chaotic situation.

Laura arrived in Pennsylvania with her son after hurricane Maria's downfall in Puerto Rico in 2017. While living in the archipelago for most of her life, Laura and her son became accustomed to navigating relationships, business, and schooling in Spanish. After hurricane Maria, Laura was forced to leave and relocate to a Pennsylvania county she had never been in before. She relied on a friend's kindness and generosity while trying to find a job and enroll her

child in the public school system of her receiving community. When schools closed due to a global pandemic in 2020, Laura saw her son's progress and confidence take a nosedive as he was forced to participate in online instruction due to the district's safety measures.

Laura braced herself for the grueling routine of the school day. She spent most of the school day, from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm, sitting in her son's proximity as he sat in front of the computer. She helped him look for links and resources the teacher shared during class time. She also translated whenever she could, though her emerging bilingualism made it a struggle. Still, she managed. After the school day ended, there was homework to complete. Laura admitted she did many of the assignments since her son was having difficulty following along.

During our conversations, Laura explained Mikael actually liked school pre-pandemic. Now, he asked Laura every day how many days until the weekend. For Laura, the shift in her son's attitude toward school was dramatic, as were the nature and amount of responsibilities for her as a parent. Remote schooling required her to be present for an entire working day. She felt depressed because she perceived teachers didn't understand her needs and concerns as the parent of a child who was a Spanish speaker with special needs. She admitted she tried going through the appropriate channels multiple times to seek help for her son, but most of the time, her concerns "se quedan en el aire (are left hanging)."

Laura confided she feared teachers and school administrators were beginning to perceive her as problematic because she often contacted them about her son's difficulties. However, this did not deter her. Laura described herself as a leona (lioness) when advocating for her son. She is willing to do whatever it takes to get him the services and supports she knows he needs and deserves.

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This vignette illustrates the practices/discourses enacted by four displaced Puerto Rican mothers as they strived to support their children's academic success in the receiving Pennsylvania public school system post-disaster. The study is couched in Critical Pedagogy (Shor, 1987) and Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth. Critical Pedagogy centers on the active engagement of exploited groups in understanding the economic, social, and political realities affecting their daily lives and working to change those realities. Moreover, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework refers to an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist" (p.77). With this framework, the study works toward epistemic justice by acknowledging and centering participants' capacities as knowers who navigate the world from multiple intersecting marginalized positions.

In this study, mothers and I co-created an informal learning space—culture circles—that supported mothers in relation to the challenges their children face in the receiving U.S. school system. Findings illustrate the discourses and actions participants engaged in as they advocated for their children to obtain the services and supports they needed before and during the pandemic using their CCW. The study contributes to scholarship on mothers and their role in education. It centers on the many (often unrecognized) practices they engage in to support their children's education in receiving schools and communities post-displacement.

Women of Color, Children, and Displacement

Disasters negatively and disproportionately affect women and children (Aldrich, 2012; Esnard & Sapat, 2014). The disruption of social or kin networks—one of the most critical

resources Women of Color draw from in their daily lives—is particularly impactful post-disaster (Fussell, 2012) since women feel "a loss of place and communality [that] multiplied the trauma of the evacuation and displacement" (p. 164). Macias et al. (2020) write about the impact loss of kin networks has on displaced Puerto Rican women, concluding disasters "wreak havoc… on relationships, families, and whole communities" (p. 119), leading to greater loss and increased vulnerability.

As can be expected, the experiences of mothers within the social context they navigate have a great impact on children (Fothergill & Peek, 2015); as Katrina's aftermath demonstrated, children affected by the hurricane "experienced poverty, violence, failing schools, and other social problems before Katrina" (Fothergill & Peek, 2015, p. 7). These pre-disaster vulnerabilities are only exacerbated after disasters—affecting children of all ages disproportionately compared to adults, leading to a cumulative vulnerability. "The disaster may be a stressor or crisis on top of other serious issues or constraints the child is already confronting….[they] will experience multiple, intersecting forms of social, environmental, physical, and economic vulnerability that will shape that child's experiences—and likelihood of survival— in a disaster" (Fothergill and Peek, 2015, p. 23). Macias et al. (2020) finds that "displaced [Puerto Rican] children are not only affected by the loss of their own homes, but also those losses within their extended family and community…The emotional toll of the disaster was quickly followed by a need to adjust to a new community and culture" (p. 125).

Despite women and children's increased vulnerability after disasters, scholars have recently begun to document women's agency and activism outside the scope of public institutions. For example, some research has detailed the vital role women-centered networks

played during the relocation processes in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, demonstrating women were doing invisible work taken for granted (Litt, 2012; Curry Rodríguez, 2014).

Scholars have linked women's civic participation in the recovery process in the aftermath of a disaster and the development of communal and individual resilience, or the capacity to adapt despite disturbance, stress, or adversity (Esnard, 2006; Weil, 2010; Aldrich, 2012). Mason (2012) conducted ethnographic work with displaced women. He noted how they managed the harsh realities of daily life post-Hurricane Katrina by engaging in problem-solving and small acts that constituted attempts at re-invention.

Motherwork, Mothering, and Social Justice

Motherhood and mothering do not occur in a void; what counts as mothering, especially good mothering, and the role mothers play in their children and families' survival depends on their sociopolitical context and the intersections of race and gender, class, and other identity classifications. Collins (2016) argues that, for Women of Color, motherwork and mothering entail "negotiating the complicated relationship of preparing children to fit into, yet resist, systems of racial domination" (p. 58). The term othermothering, defined by Wane (2000) as "a form of cultural work or… one way communities organize to nurture both themselves and future generations" (p. 113). Othermothering recognizes the communal importance of mothering done by Women of Color, often through fictive kinship. Collins (2016) describes othermothers as Women of Color who "help build community institutions and fight for the welfare of their neighbors….[as] part of the extended kinship networks…"(p. 443). Literature on mothering and othermothers demonstrates the key role such labor plays in families and Communities of Color.

Finally, the labor Women of Color engage in is political, even if it is rarely recognized or named as such. Dewi Oka (2016) argues Mothers of Color “are busy making and defending homespaces; strategizing for the next check, the next hour, the next meal. They are out there demonstrating that it is possible and beautiful to continue under the most hostile and precarious conditions, even when they have to do it alone” (p. 51). We can only understand the power and complexity of mothering, mothers, and motherwork by documenting and generating knowledge with Women of Color from different socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds (Naples, 1992).

Motherwork, Education, and Resistance

Collins (1990) argues that motherwork's subversive potential is well-known by both dominant groups and marginalized communities. Motherwork has the potential to (re)produce white supremacist ideologies and submissiveness to dominant groups or to resist those ideologies and engage in action toward transformation and liberation. Schools are one institution where submissiveness and/or resistance are fully displayed.

Given the prevalence of racist nativism in the U.S., White, English-speaking individuals are generally perceived and treated as belonging to the U.S. In contrast, racialized individuals who speak languages other than English are typically "othered." As microcosms reflecting the larger social context, schools (re)produce ideologies about belonging, Whiteness, and English hegemony. More specifically, schools exclude children's cultural and linguistic practices from minoritized communities, treating this knowledge as irrelevant or problematic (Valenzuela, 1999).

Mothers have to navigate a complicated reality: they must teach their children how to

inhabit spaces that work to oppress and assimilate them while also showing them how to preserve their sense of worth. As such, mothers must constantly push back and resist education systems that deny or invalidate the mothering and homeplace they create for their children, thereby "challeng[ing] the power of mothers to raise their children as they see fit" (Collins, 2016, p. 54).

Theoretical Framework

Critical Pedagogy

Critical Pedagogy (CP) refers to a social and educational vision as well as practice (Gore, 1992), centering the active engagement of exploited groups in understanding their oppression (Kirylo, Thirumurthy, Smith & McLaren, 2010). As a social and educational vision, McLaren (1999) argues CP is “a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming… the production of knowledge…and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state” (p. 51). Due to the very nature of critical pedagogy, which involves “creative effort that conjoins deep personal meaning and common effort” (McLaren, 1999, p. 50) and “the development of a critical race, gender, and class consciousness” (Solórzano, 2013, p. 56), it is central to depart from the social contexts in which participants produce and enact knowledge (Kirylo et al., 2010).

Freire centered dialogue as a process of (re)creation that problematizes what we think we know and creates new knowledge from dialectical opposition (Bartlett, 2005). In other words, CP departs from the premise that education should foster the *production* rather than the transference of knowledge (Shor, 1987). This knowledge production would be in the service of the examination of asymmetrical power relations (re)created in schools (Bartolomé, 1999) to disrupt

socio-economic injustice leading to oppression and exploitation (Freire, 2000; McLaren, 1999; Shor, 1987). Furthermore, this disruption occurs through praxis as a process of reflection and action whereby "meaning circulates, is acted upon, and revised…resulting in political interpretation, sense-making, and will formation" (McLaren, 1999, p. 49).

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso (2005) coined the term Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) to flip the script on the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), knowledges and practices enacted by members of dominant groups are considered valuable (i.e. capital), and members from marginalized communities have access to these knowledges and practices through schooling. As Yosso (2005) notes:

> *Bourdieu's theoretical insight about how a hierarchical society reproduces itself has often been interpreted as a way to explain why the academic and social outcomes of People of Color are significantly lower than the outcomes of Whites. The assumption follows that People of Color 'lack' the social and cultural capital required for social mobility. As a result, schools most often work from this assumption in structuring ways to help 'disadvantaged' students whose race and class background has left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital.* (p. 70)

Yosso (2005) flips the script on this view of cultural capital by drawing from tenets of CRT in education and their focus on "outsider, *mestiza*, transgressive knowledges" (p. 70). Yosso (2005) ultimately argues members of marginalized communities have under-utilized assets in the

form of cultural and linguistic knowledges and practices whose recognition and implementation in learning spaces has transformative potential. Yosso's (2005) six forms of capital are:

> (1) Aspirational capital, or the ability to aspire beyond one's current circumstances despite real or perceived challenges.
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> (2) Linguistic capital, or the intellectual and social skills attained through the linguistic repertoire used at home.
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> (3) Familial capital, or the cultural knowledge nurtured through kin networks, resulting in "a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition. This form of cultural wealth engages a commitment to community well-being and expands the concept of family to include a more broad understanding of kinship" (p. 79).
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> (4) Social capital, or access to community/institutional networks and resources by using communication strategies with networks of peer and social contacts.
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> (5) Navigational capital, or the ability to maneuver through social institutions, including schools, professions, health care, and legal systems presenting constraints against people of color.
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> (6) Resistant capital, or knowledge and skills to confront, communicate, and challenge institutional oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism. (Aragon, 2018)

In short, CCW as a framework places "the knowledge, strengths, and cultural resources within Latina/o communities" (Jimenez, 2020, p. 779) at the forefront.

Study Context

In estimation, Puerto Rico lost about 4% of its population from 2017 (the year of Irma and María's landfall) to 2019. On January 2020, a series of earthquakes in the southwest region

of the main island, including a 6.4 earthquake, wreaked further havoc on residents just before a global pandemic further exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequities. Furthermore, given that the study was actually conducted during the 2020-2021 academic year when COVID-19 changed how we lived our lives and interacted with one another, the pandemic became a significant element contextualizing the findings of this project.

Pennsylvania was a receiving state for a large percentage of this migration wave from Puerto Rico, and it is currently home to the third-largest concentration of Puerto Ricans (493, 255) in the U.S., only surpassed by Florida (1,190,981) and New York (1,096,823). The city where the participants in this study relocated post-displacement had the highest share of citizens living in poverty in the nation for cities— populations of more than 65,000, according to the 2010 census. In 2011, it was declared the "poorest small city in the nation" (Richter, 2020). According to the 2018 five-year American Community Survey, the poverty rate decreased over the next decade, with 35.4% of the city's residents below the poverty line.

The school district serving the city, the fourth largest in Pennsylvania, includes more than 17,800 students across 13 elementary schools, five middle schools, one high school, an online academy, and a career and technology center shared with a neighboring district. Ninety-three percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 25 percent are labeled as English-Language Learners, with nearly 81% of students identified as Latino.

Given my journey coming to this work and the emotional investment I developed, it is critical to share how my positionality influenced the space I collaboratively created with mothers. I conducted this research as a Puerto Rican, white-passing mother born and raised on the island. I left my family’s home for the first time to pursue my doctoral studies in the U.S. in

2015. Hurricane Maria's downfall was a very traumatizing event for me. Despite the fact I was in Colorado, most of my close family members were on the island and experienced the disaster firsthand. I was unable to communicate with them for weeks. Moreover, I was on the island in 2020 and experienced the series of earthquakes. I share these experiences to claim "a genealogical, cultural and political set of experiences" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 47). My positionality is integral to the goals and the intention behind this study.

Method

Culture Circles

In this study, Freirean culture circles provided the primary method to explore displaced Puerto Rican mothers' discourses and experiences in support of their children's educational trajectories in the receiving U.S. school system. Souto-Manning (2010) explains, "culture circles are based on two basic tenets: the political nature of education and dialogue in the process of educating. These tenets take place within the context in which learners live, as their problems are analyzed critically and politically, and dialogue is used as a way to progressively overcome and find solutions to those problems" (p. 18). In this study, culture circles supported displaced Puerto Rican mothers to construct a critical learning space in community to work toward more equitable conditions for themselves and their families. Culture circles as a method entails the following recursive process:

1) conducting a thematic investigation to learn about participants' lives and the context they navigate

2) generating themes that represent participants' everyday lives/experiences

3) creating codifications or representations of these themes through pictures, poems, stories, news articles, etc.

4) creating a space for dialogue "nourished by love, humility, hope, faith, and mutual trust" (Freire, 2013, p. 40).

Culture circles must adapt to participants' contexts and needs. The method has been adapted in different contexts within the U.S., including elementary school classrooms (Souto-Manning, 2010), pre- and in-service teacher education programs (Souto-Manning, 2010; Stillman, Struthers Ahmed & Castañeda-Flores, 2019; Stillman & Luciano Beltramo, 2019), adult education programs (Souto-Manning, 2010), and graduate courses (Freeman, Flores, Garzón, Gumina, Sambolín Morales, Silva Diaz & Stamatis, 2019). As such, the method can provide the tools needed to create critical learning spaces that reflect participants' needs and context, regardless of age.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred completely online due to COVID-19. I conducted an initial round of interviews at the beginning of the data collection period with 9 participants, and I crafted initial generative themes based on what I learned. These shifted during our time together, and they included the following prompts:

1) *Do you feel you belong in this space (i.e. schools and the wider community)? Why or why not?*
2) *Do you advocate for your children in school? How do you feel schools view you and your children as a result?*

3) When have you felt powerful or empowered?

4) Is there anything we could do to improve your situation? How might we do this?

I invited the mothers to participate in 10 virtual culture circle meetings during the 2020-2021 academic year. Each Zoom meeting lasted one and a half to two hours. During the virtual sessions, participants engaged in dialogue around the generative themes. The intention was to take up the themes through a process of dialogue meant to promote conscientizacao (Freire, 2000), or conscientization—a critical awareness of participants; position within the issue. I want to emphasize that, most of the time, the questions or topics were not taken up the way I had originally thought. Instead, participants took over the conversations in the ways that were most beneficial to them. We also created Jamboards and shared pictures and artifacts during our time together in the culture circles. I wrote analytic memos immediately following each culture circle session and individual interview, as well as whenever I needed to think through an idea for a future culture circle session. Finally, I conducted a final round of interviews toward the end of the 2020-2021 academic year.

The development of trusting relationships among participants is crucial (Souto-Manning, 2010), and I took steps to encourage community-building during our virtual sessions. I left goodie bags on mothers' front stoops with their beverage of choice and art supplies such as canvases, acrylic paints, brushes, and play dough prior to each meeting. We celebrated birthdays and shared cake I distributed earlier that day, sang along to songs played over Zoom, and shared intimate moments and tears, all while never occupying the same physical space. As a result of these relationships, mothers in the study felt comfortable enough to take ownership of the space and steer the conversation in ways that better suited their needs. Participants also started voicing

activities they wanted to do while we had our conversations, which served as another indicator that they felt like equal participants and co-creators of the space. Throughout the process, four focal mothers developed an especially strong bond and attended meetings consistently, which is why they are the focus of this piece.

Analytic Process

I relied on open coding to create an initial understanding of the data. Given (2008) explains that "the intent of open coding is to break down the data into segments in order to interpret them. Detailed word-by-word and line-by-line analysis is conducted by researchers asking what is going on" (p. 582). In this study, the codes I chose during the open-coding process were informed by the literature review and the theoretical framework. As a result, codes reflected the issues that came up in participants' children's schooling and the ways Community Cultural Wealth were reflected in mothers' discourses and actions. I wrote memos of the links I noticed between each piece of data and the theoretical framework and literature review.

After I completed a list of codes based on the initial round of coding, I proceeded with axial coding in an attempt to see links/relationships between codes and events: "axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). In short, axial coding entails finding connections, nesting codes, and creating subcodes to arrange the categories created during open-coding in ways that demonstrate the relationships between them. These connections facilitated my sense-making process as I tried to understand what I was seeing in the data and emerging themes.

After completing axial coding, I continued to modify the coding window through a recursive data analysis process. This allowed me to categorize the most salient codes into broader themes that spoke to the research questions. Based on the coding, three salient themes stood out: *Advocacy for Children's Education Pre-Pandemic, Advocacy for Children's Education During the Pandemic*, and *Mothers' Community Cultural Wealth*. Finally, I held a meeting with participants to share emerging findings and hold myself accountable to them (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013), which was particularly important to me.

Findings

In this section, I illustrate some of the challenges the focal mothers had to confront in the U.S. public school system before the pandemic brought a new set of challenges to navigate. I will also share instances where mothers advocated for their children using their Community Cultural Wealth. Specifically, mothers demonstrated navigational capital, or the ability to maneuver through social institutions (i.e. schools and school districts) that present constraints against People of Color (Yosso, 2005), resistant capital, or the knowledge and skills to confront, communicate, and challenge institutional oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism (Aragon, 2018), and social capital, or access to community/institutional networks and resources by using communication strategies with networks of peer and social contacts.

Advocacy in Education Pre-Pandemic

The focal mothers had differing opinions about the quality of schools in the receiving district. In Pennsylvania, Laura's son participated in speech therapy, had an aid to help him during class time, and received tutoring from the migrant program as well. Laura was pleased with the

supports the receiving school district provided for her son pre-pandemic. That being said, Laura's son still had issues in his new school. Laura recalled one incident during our interview:

> Pues algo que me preocupaba es que cuando el nene estaba en la escuela había muchos niños que me le hacían bullying y me le daban. Eso es algo que pues, que yo siempre tuve la preocupación cada vez que el nene se iba a la escuela y eso. Y se burlaban mucho de él por su problema del habla. Que una vez me lo golpearon en la guagua escolar y tuve que ir a reclamar a la escuela y me dijeron que ellos no tenían nada que ver porque eso sucedió en la guagua escolar. Que tenía que ir a la oficina de las guaguas escolares y darle el reporte. Pero se quedó en el aire. Lo hice. Fui allá. Dije lo que pasó. Y pues con todo y eso, con testigos, no quisieron hacer nada. Lo dejaron allí
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> *Well, something that worried me when my son was in school…there were many kids that bullied and hit him. That's something that I was always worried about every time he went to school. And they made fun of him because of his speech problem. One time they hit him in the school bus and I had to go to the school to get answers and they told me they had nothing to do with that because it happened in the school bus. They told me I had to go to the school bus office and report it. But nothing came of it. I did it. I went over there. I told them what happened. And despite all that, even with witnesses, they did nothing. They just left it there*. (Interview, February 4, 2021)

Laura tried to advocate for her son, but felt dismissed and unheard. She went to the school and the school bus office in her efforts to advocate for her son and improve his circumstances, displaying her navigational capital. She took all the right steps, but the systems in place ultimately failed her. During a culture circle meeting, she shared that her son had been

involved in other violent incidents prior to arriving in Pennsylvania. In other words, this problem persisted no matter where they were, but that never stopped Laura from intervening and advocating. Her advocacy and agency on behalf of her son was clearly a source of pride for her and she was willing and able to increase her navigational capital for his sake.

For Melissa, the difference between Pennsylvania and Puerto Rico in terms of the quality of education and the treatment her children received in schools was stark, at least pre-pandemic and remote instruction. Even though Melissa did not like to talk about her daughters and their difficulties in school, the little she did share centered her efforts to advocate for her daughters when she felt they were not adequately supported at school. In terms of her youngest daughter, Melissa explained:

> Pero lo que pasó con la chiquita es que ella tiene 4 años pero los cumple en septiembre 16 y sabes que aquí es hasta septiembre 1. Pues yo sentí que dejarla sin nada era desperdiciar la inteligencia que ella tiene porque como la viste aquel día en la cámara *laughs*, ella es bien…bien rapidita. Hablé en el [Intermediate Unit] y la cogieron rapidito. Y gracias a Dios va a las millas
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> *What happened with the little one is that she's 4 years old but she turned 4 on September 16 and here it's until September 1. But I felt that leaving her with nothing would be wasting her intelligence because as you saw that day on camera *laughs* she is quite… quite savvy. I talked with the [Intermediate Unit] and they took her right away. And she's progressing very quickly*. (Interview, December 11, 2020)

Melissa exhibited navigational capital by looking for resources outside those provided directly by the school so her youngest daughter could get the best opportunities available to her. In Melissa's eyes, not doing this would equal wasting her daughter's potential. She also seemed to take pride in her ability to get her daughter into a particular program despite the linguistic difficulties she herself often encountered as a Spanish-speaker with emerging bilingualism in her receiving community. In this example, Melissa too demonstrated navigational capital.

Karla, on the other hand, had many issues with her eldest daughter's transition to school in Pennsylvania (her youngest didn't go to school yet at the time). She explained her daughter's grades took a dive when they moved to Pennsylvania, but she didn't blame the school. As she put it:

> Era una situación como bien difícil porque yo me ponía en su nivel. Porque yo le decía a mi esposo, si soy yo que soy adulta y no me acostumbro, también lloro todos los días, [imagínate ella] (*It was a very difficult situation because I put myself in her shoes. Because I told my husband, if I'm an adult and I'm not getting used to it, and I cry every day, [imagine her]*. (Interview, November 17, 2020)

In this excerpt, Karla recognized the circumstances of forced displacement were difficult for the entire family, and she attributed her oldest daughter's difficulty adjusting to her new school partly due to these circumstances. However, Karla also had criticisms about the school she initially enrolled her daughter in. When asked what she thought the biggest challenge for her daughter was, she responded:

> Yo pienso que el inglés, porque ella estaba acostumbradita con sus amiguitas en Puerto Rico, que salía al patio. Que era diferente. Entonces aquí cuando la apunte…esa escuela

pues no era muy buena que digamos. Entonces ella como que no se integraba. Mi nena era bien tímida. Entonces pues era bien difícil pa' integrarse. Y pues, conocer nuevas amigas. Pero el no saber inglés era mucho más imposible. Y ella decía, "Mami, pero es que nadie me hace caso." Ella salía pal patio y que nadie la hacía caso.

I think it was English because she was used to being with her friends at school in Puerto Rico when she went out on the yard. It was different. And that school wasn't very good. And so she wasn't able to integrate herself into the group. My daughter was very shy. So it was difficult to become part of the group. And to meet new friends. But it was much more impossible since she didn't know English. And she told me, "Mom, it's just no one pays attention to me." She went out to the yard and no one paid attention to her. (Interview, November 17, 2020)

Karla tried to provide an explanation of why her daughter was having a hard time in school but didn't fully blame the school. Her daughter apparently had strong opinions as to why she was having such a difficult time. According to Karla, her daughter frequently stated: "Ay mami, pero yo creo que Mrs. — es racista porque ella a mí no me ayuda en nada. Porque como yo no hablo inglés ella a mi no me ayuda en nada (*Oh mom, I think Mrs. — is racist because she doesn't help me at all. She doesn't help me at all because I don't speak English*)" (Interview, November 17, 2020). According to Karla, her oldest daughter felt she was receiving discriminatory treatment at her school based on her home language, despite the fact they were living in a community with a large Puerto Rican population.

The family moved to a different apartment. As a result, Karla's daughter went to a new school. The change was striking. According to Karla, her daughter made new friends and loved

going to school. Then, Karla got the opportunity to move to what she described as her dream apartment. It was bigger than the apartment they were living in at the time, where they had to turn the living room into a makeshift bedroom to accommodate the family. The family moved to their dream home, and Karla admitted she continued taking her daughter to the school she loved. However, the school eventually found out she moved to the new apartment, and her daughter had to attend the corresponding school:

> Ay muchacha. Ahí otra vez fue el mismo problema de cuando vinimos. Que yo me voy pa' Puerto Rico. Que a mi no me gusta esta escuela. Todos los días yo tenía que llevarla llorando. Llorando y ella bajaba llorando, pero envenená. Que ella no quería ir. Que las nenas ahí no le hacen caso. Que no hablan con ella. Que no hablan español. Que no le gusta. Que yo me quiero ir. Por cierto, yo tenía que irme a trabajar y cuando yo la llamaba todavía ella estaba en casa. Ella esperaba que todo el mundo entrara para ella irse. Llegaba hasta tarde y me llegaron a llamar a mí que la nena estaba llegándome tarde. Una nena que es bien disciplinada
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> *Oh girl. It was the same problem as when we arrived. I want to go to Puerto Rico. I don't like this school. Every day she cried when I took her to school. She cried and she got out of the car crying, furious. She didn't want to go. The girls over there didn't pay attention to her. They didn't talk to her. They didn't speak Spanish. She didn't like it. Mom, I don't like it. I don't want to go. By the way, I had to go to work and when I called her she was often still at home. She waited for everyone to go in and then she left. She got in late and they even called to tell me she was coming in late. And she is such a disciplined girl.* (Interview, November 17, 2020)

Even though Karla's daughter was shy, she had found a place that made her feel welcomed and safe. In other words, the issue wasn't Karla's daughter. The challenge was the way some schools and learning spaces made Karla's daughter feel excluded, especially by making her feel as if speaking Spanish was a problem. Referring to English language supports for her daughter in the first school (the one Karla's daughter did not feel welcomed in), Karla explained the following:

> Ya ahí [en esa escuela] no cualificó para el programa ese de que le ponían una maestra o en grupo donde hablaban todos en español. Yo lo que hice fue que me metí a la oficina, le expliqué, hablé, y lo que hicieron fue que la dejaron como una semana nada más en ese salón de hispanos. Pero ya después otra vez me la movieron para todo en inglés y ahí yo dije, "voy a tener que hacer algo. Voy a tener que hacer algo"
>
> *When I took her [to that school], she didn't qualify for that program where they put her with a teacher or a group where everyone speaks Spanish. I went to their office, I explained, I talked, and what they did was they left her like a week in the classroom with Hispanics. But then she was moved back to all English, and then I said to myself, I need to do something. I need to do something*. (Interview, November 17, 2020)

Karla did her best to support her daughter and made some choices and sacrifices along the way to that end. She tried navigating the school district several times to advocate for her daughter and her needs, displaying her capital. Even though the system did not support her daughter's needs for a culturally sustaining space, Karla knew what to do and decided to advocate for her daughter's needs anyway. She moved to a third apartment so her daughter could return to the school she loved. Karla demonstrated resistant capital or the knowledge and skills to

challenge institutional oppression. Rather than simply accepting the district's policy, she recognized her daughter wasn't being served and had needs that weren't met. She felt motivated to act, took action, and navigated the system to get her daughter into the school she wanted.

English language supports for students were brought up in culture circles as one issue mothers felt the district could improve on. When the topic was brought up in a culture circle, Laura responded the following:

> Por lo menos…ellos no explican bien. Este, verdad, los servicios que brindan a los estudiantes. Y cómo funciona cada cosa, so yo he tenido que a veces preguntar fuera de la escuela y preguntarle a las mismas personas que tienen hijos en la escuela, cómo funciona este programa, cómo se hace esto, cómo se hace lo otro.
>
> *At least…they don't explain things well. Um, right, the services that they provide for students. And how everything works, so I've had to ask outside of school and ask other people who also have their children in school, how this program works, how you do this, how you do that.*(Culture Circle, February 18, 2021)

Laura's response indicates that she felt she didn't get adequate guidance and information about what exactly her son would be receiving to support his English language acquisition. She admitted she often relied on her social capital—her communication strategies with networks of peers and social contacts—and asked parents with children enrolled in the same school her son attended to get more information. In other words, she didn't simply sit back and accept she wasn't getting the information. She demonstrated and accumulated social capital to get the information she needed.

Melissa's answer to the question about the district's language supports for emergent bilinguals was the following:

> Mmmm…es que a mí como que ... .mmmmm…todo fue tan rápido. A mí quien me ayuda fue Tatiana, la del programa migrante. Fue lo que…fue el angelito que dijo, yo voy a coger a [tu hija], yo la voy a ayudar
>
> *Mmmm…it's just that for me like…ummm….everything was so fast. The person who helped me was Tatiana, the one from the migrant program. She was the…the little angel that said I'm going to take [your daughter], I'm going to help her.* (Culture Circle, February 18, 2021)

Melissa admitted the enrollment process happened quickly for her. She had to figure out where to live, how to make ends meet for their family, and where and how her daughters would be schooled in a new receiving community that was culturally and linguistically different from what she had experienced her whole life. She did not blame the school or staff. It all happened very fast, and she was grateful. However, it was clear Melissa didn't have a firm grasp of what her daughter's language supports would entail, what the reclassification system was, and what her daughters had to do to exit the language support program. What little information she did have came from the migrant program, which is not readily accessible to every parent from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

Agency, Resistance, and Education During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, other challenges arose, especially since mothers were able to see the classroom dynamic and witness their children navigating school as culturally and

linguistically diverse individuals. For the first time, mothers were *in* the classrooms with children due to online instruction. In this study, in addition to the challenges inherent in supporting their children's schooling all day (a challenge many parents with children in K-12 schools had to tackle), focal mothers had to witness and navigate the ways schools struggled to support culturally and linguistically diverse students, especially those with special needs.

Johanna spoke about the challenges families who have students with special needs face. She explained:

> Un niño de educación especial con deficit de atención, con autismo, ocho horas en una computadora ...hicieron un currículo apresuradamente y no los estoy culpando porque, ¿quien sabía la pandemia que venía? Pero [el distrito] no dijo "vamos a hacer acomodo razonable o vamos a abrir las escuelas con distanciamiento para los que se distraen con facilidad, que tiene ADHD o para los autistas que no hablan." Y yo digo, en ¿una silla de madera ocho horas un niño con autismo? ¿Es necesario que ese niño esté ocho horas ahí? No. No, porque ni yo misma lo soporto.
>
> *A child with special needs who had attention deficit and autism, sitting 8 hours in front of a computer…they made a curriculum in a hurry and I don't blame them because, who could have foreseen the pandemic that came? But [the district] didn't say, let's provide reasonable accommodations or let's open schools with social distancing measures for those who get distracted easily, that have ADHD o for children with autism who don't speak. A child with autism in a wooden chair for 8 hours? Is it necessary for that child to be there for 8 hours? No. Because not even I can stand it. (Interview, October 13, 2020)*

The concerns Johanna expressed were echoed by Laura's recounting of her experience with her son and remote learning. Laura summed up how things were going for her son during the period of remote learning as follows:

> Con la pandemia él esta en retroceso otra vez. Que por cierto, hoy tuve que llamar a la escuela y contar lo que está sucediendo con el nene y eso y con la asistente que le dieron a él, que no cumple con las horas que tiene que cumplir con el nene mío. Esta faltando mucho. Nos quedamos en espera así en Zoom o dónde nos vayamos a conectar, nos deja plantados. Y el nene ha ido en retroceso. Se le ha olvidado todo, se me ha quedado atrás en las clases y eso es una frustración para mí porque él estaba al principio, antes de la pandemia…. cuando estaba en la escuela, pues allá le daban más ayudas. Le daban tutorías. El tenía a alguien siempre al lado de él hasta que salía de la escuela. Cosa que no supiera, la persona que siempre estaba con él le terminaba de escribir su libreta o en su papel, lo que fuera, y lo ayudaba
>
> *With the pandemic he's going backwards again. And by the way, today I had to call the school and tell them what's happening with my son and the assistant that was assigned to him, who is not keeping the hours she has to complete with my son. She's missing a lot of sessions. We keep waiting on Zoom or wherever we're supposed to log on and she just leaves us waiting. And my son has been going backwards. He's forgotten everything, he's lagging behind in classes and that's frustrating to me because he was, at the beginning, before the pandemic…when he was at school, they gave him, you know, more help. They gave him tutoring. He always had someone next to him until he got out of school. Anything he didn't know, the person who was always with him finished writing for him in*

his, you know, his notebook or paper or whatever, and helped him). (Interview, February 4, 2021)

Laura compared the supports and the education her son received pre- and during the pandemic, and she felt remote instruction had been detrimental to his progress. For example, he'd forgotten how to read. She gave an example of one way she advocated for her son, contacting school administrators to try to change his circumstances and get the aid's help for the amount of time he is entitled to, despite communication issues she encountered due to linguistic differences. Laura later adds, "quien se termina de fastidiar son los papás porque son los que se quedan enseñándole lo que se supone que le enseñe la escuela. Yo he tratado de tantas formas buscarle ayuda al nene *(the parents are the ones who bear the burden because they have to teach them what the school is supposed to teach them. I've tried so many different ways to get help for my son*) (Interview, February 4, 2021).

Laura explicitly critiqued how remote instruction was not set up to support children with special needs. Moreover, she exhibited resistant and navigational capital, critiquing the way remote instruction did not take into account the needs of children like her son and engaging in actions (such as phone calls and meetings with teachers and school administrators) to change her and her son's circumstances.

For Karla, the transition to online schooling was incredibly challenging as well. According to Karla:

> Ahora que están cogiendo las tareas en la casa, sabes, que están por computadora, me he dado cuenta de que no dan toda la materia como la dan en Puerto Rico. La nena mía esta en tercero y le dan una de tareas que yo digo, "Wao, a mí en tercero no me daban eso. A

mí…que yo me acuerde a mi división me la llegaron a dar en quinto. Y le hacen unas preguntas que ni yo misma las puedo sacar la contestación. Y yo, "qué es esto?!" Si esto a mí nunca me lo dieron…Sí, por lo menos en esa parte a mí se me hace bien complicado. Y más que es en inglés. Que yo tengo que estar traduciendo. Se me hace bien difícil. Ah! Y entonces están en la casa todo el día en la computadora y terminan en la computadora y son trabajos que tengo que entrar con ella a hacerlos. Y yo por eso no me puedo ir a trabajar. Imposible.

Now that they are doing classes at home, you know, they're in the computer and I've noticed that they don't give the material the same way they do in Puerto Rico. My daughter is in third grade and they give assignments that I'm like wow, they didn't give me that in third grade. For me…from what I remember they gave me division in fifth grade. And they ask her some questions that even I can't figure out the answer to. And I'm like, what is this?! I was never given this before…. Yeah, at least for me it's very complicated. And even more so since it's in English. Because I need to translate. It's very difficult. Oh! And they are at home all the time at the computer and when they're done with the computer then there's the homework I need to go in and do with her. And that's why I can't go to work. Impossible. (Interview, February 4, 2021)

Due to the global pandemic, remote instruction provided the opportunity for caretakers to see classroom practices and previously invisible dynamics. Now that she can see what is going on in the classroom, Karla thinks the material her third-grader is taking is too advanced, making it harder for her as her caretaker to help with projects and assignments. In other words, Karla implied the content in Pennsylvania is more advanced and challenging than the curriculum in

Puerto Rico, but she didn't see that as a positive, given she, as a mother, had to assume responsibility for translating and explaining the material due to the transition to online instruction.

Karla felt the need to step up and find creative ways to circumnavigate the challenges the school has created for her daughter in terms of delivering content without adequately supporting English language acquisition. For example, she shared with us that she encouraged her daughter to watch YouTube videos in English as a way for her to learn the language. Moreover, Karla was in the process of navigating how to develop her daughter's bilingualism. It was up to Karla to look up information online and come up with creative solutions to complement her daughter's education, something she had to do a lot more often after the shift to remote instruction. Such moves demonstrate Karla's resistant capital as she found alternative ways to circumnavigate institutional barriers.

Melissa, on the other hand, thought that the education her daughters received in Pennsylvania was superior to that in P.R. When I asked Melissa about the ways she advocated for her daughters during remote learning, she shared the following story:

> Pues, por la grande, solamente si ella no entiende algo pues yo trato de explicarle y si no me recuerdo ...por ejemplo, en matemáticas, que yo soy bien malita, pues pregunto al maestro que me explique a mí y entonces yo le explico a ella. Pero a veces lo hago peor porque yo soy mala en el inglés, entonces le explico en español y lo que hago es confundirla *laughs* ¡Dile al maestro que te explique!

(*Well, for the oldest, I try to explain things only if she doesn't understand something, and if I don't remember… for example, in math, which I'm pretty bad at, well I ask the teacher to explain it to me and then I explain it to her. But sometimes I do it worse because I'm not good at English, so I explain it to her in Spanish and what I do is confuse her *laughs.* Tell the teacher to explain it again!*). (Individual Interview, December 11, 2020)

Here, Melissa listened as her daughter's teacher explained math in English during a virtual lesson. She tried to explain the concept to her daughter in Spanish but got confused because her English skills were still emergent. She told her daughter to ask the teacher to explain the material again so she could hear it and explain it to her daughter in Spanish. Melissa advocated for her children and the education she knew they were entitled to, especially with virtual learning due to the pandemic. In this case, she spoke up on behalf of her child, modeling how to speak up and asking the teacher to repeat themselves so her daughter could understand. For Melissa, she found and modeled creative ways to circumnavigate challenges.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This piece illustrates some of the ways displaced Puerto Rican mothers' have navigated their children's public school education in Pennsylvania pre- and during a global pandemic as members of a culturally and linguistically diverse community. Before the pandemic, families' participants encountered issues having their community's cultural wealth—their navigational capital, in particular—recognized by schools and districts. Moreover, they expressed a lack of clarity in the language supports their children received as Spanish speakers with emerging bilingualism enrolled in English-only programs.

During the pandemic, however, the challenges participants faced changed dramatically, complicated by the issues that predated the pandemic. For example, the difficulties inherent to online instruction, such as being able to sit still and follow along with instruction for an extended period of time and accessing materials and resources, were further complicated by language differences. Focal mothers had to devote a significant amount of time to support their children during and after instruction, when students had to complete homework, to the extent that one mother stated it was impossible for her to seek employment. For the first time, mothers were in the classrooms and realized the supports their children needed in the classrooms, and they demonstrated and accumulated CCW to support and advocate for them.

Although culture circles are very context-bound and they intend to produce locally useful information in the service of locally relevant actions. The findings in this piece have publicly useful implications as well. It is important to have a deeper understanding of the challenges CLD students and families face in their receiving schools and communities and to recognize the wealth of knowledge and skills families bring with them. These knowledges and skill sets are often dismissed or made invisible in U.S. public schools (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). This study illustrates some of the unique challenges displaced Puerto Rican families and students face when relocating from the archipelago to a receiving school in the United States. Mothers witnessing classroom dynamics for the first time due to remote instruction brought on by COVID-19 felt the need to intervene and draw from/model their CCW to support their children's education. Collins (2016) argues that "motherhood occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, class, and gender" (p. 45). Participants' motherwork in this study shapes their identities and positionalities as Women of Color, colonized subjects, and

members of low socioeconomic status. These intersecting oppressions shape how they make sense of and navigate the world.

Yosso (2005) argues members of marginalized communities have under-utilized assets in the form of cultural knowledges and practices whose recognition and implementation in learning spaces has transformative potential. By documenting the discourses and practices mothers engage in to navigate institutions and receive the services and supports their children deserve, this piece centers displaced Puerto Rican mothers' CCW. This includes their navigational capital, or the ability to maneuver through social institutions (including schools) presenting constraints against people of color, and social capital, or access to community/institutional networks and resources by using communication strategies with networks of peer and social contacts. It also encompasses resistant capital, or the knowledge and skills to confront, communicate, and challenge institutional oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism (Aragon, 2018). In doing so, this piece highlights the need for epistemic and educational justice that both recognizes all the invisible labor Women of Color engage in to support their children's education and argues for more equitable systems.

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