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Killing for the Grade

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Using Bourdieu's concepts of social reproduction, this study examined parental involvement of teachers in the context of "academics arm race" (Demerath, 2009). This study assumes that teachers as parents are supposed to be able to negotiate more skillfully in the educational realm given their forms of capital and knowledge of the various forms of curriculum. Lareau (2003) cited in general terms that parents' occupational and educational statuses influence parental involvement. The specific sociohistorical-economic context in the Philippines is marked by hyperinflating educational market, dwindling educational budget, and the meager teacher salary. This context plus the honor and award system of the public school system reproduces a certain hypervigilant parenting that will ensure access to quality yet affordable education for their children. Critical pedagogy offers an alternative vision of resistance and cultural production through the formation of communities, collaborative efforts, and reimagining of identities. Critical pedagogy would also entail deconstructing orthodoxy to reveal the real foes, to demand that the state reclaims its stewardship over its youth's education, and to regulate the predatory market. Such moves will make schools more meritocratic, safer for children, and less prone to inequity.

Keywords: parental involvement; social reproduction; Critical Pedagogy; academic competition

INTRODUCTION

Describing the increasing intensity of parental involvement, this study's interlocutors described their actions to influence the teachers of their

children starting with giving subtle verbal suggestions, then giving gifts, then it escalates to pushing and harassing, and finally, “killing.” This paper attempts to analyze why, how, and for what purpose such “killing” occurs.

A hypervigilant type of parenting has been examined in both popular and scholarly papers calling it with several names: hyperparenting, bulldoze parenting, and the most popular, helicopter parenting. The hovering of parents, thus helicopter parenting, over places where their children are, in primary school where they attempt to negotiate with teachers about their children’s grades and up to the workplace where parents would go to the extent of discussing with employers about their adult children’s pay and benefits, is amplified further by the parents’ use of technology like mobile phone which is now dubbed as the “electronic umbilical cord.”

Demerath (2009) situates such “academic arms race” which he observed in his ethnographic study of a high school in America as a means to secure admission to competitive colleges. With such parenting patterns, a new growth industry has emerged marked by test review services, hiring of coaches and specialized consultants, and even college preparation camps. Such parenting pattern is distinct among middle-class parents, specifically professional middle class (Nelson, 2010).

This cultural logic of parenting among middle-class families is described as concerted cultivation that is based on a “professional” view of parenting, something that working-class and poor parents are unable to do (Lareau, 2003).

...both Black and White middle-class parents, and mothers in particular, routinely scanned the horizon for opportunities to activate their cultural capital and social capital on behalf of their children. By shrewdly framing their interventions in ways that institutions such as schools and public and private recreational programs found compatible with their organizational processes, parents could gain important advantages for their children. These benefit children to be developed in every way in order to “enhance their future possibilities. (ibid)

Using Bourdieu’s frame, my study attempts to describe and analyze the parental involvement in the context of schooling, specifically focusing on teachers described as people of authority and gatekeepers. I will analyze how

parental involvement is mediated by the deployment of forms of capital that are exclusively available to teachers, analyzing it in the broader context of societal structures and forces that may be unique to the Philippine context. To generate data, I interviewed separately two (female) parents, one of whom is a teacher of a science high school. I also interviewed a small group of teacher-parents in an online message board. I also analyzed written policies of the Department of Education regarding the selection of honor students. Using case study method, I put together the information to craft a holistic description of the case. For this paper, I identified emerging and recurring themes and categories that would respond to the research objectives I formulated.

To practice reflexivity, I had to become aware of my own habitus as a middle-class professional parent and, at the same time, an educator. I acknowledge my tendency to normativize middle-class parenting and also my sense of anxiety about the future of my children because of the increasing cost of living in the Philippines.

This study starts with an attempt to locate the phenomenon theoretically and present the objectives of the study and the means to gather and analyze data. The second part provides a general profile of the parenting involvement of a teacher-mother whom I am calling Precy. The next section will be a presentation of three emerging themes which I entitled, “I Know the Curriculum (Explicit, Implicit, and the Extracurricular),” “Guarding the Decimal Points,” and “Hyperinflating Educational Market.” The fourth part is to identify forms of resistance against the orthodoxy imposed by the state and the market. The final section includes a conclusion and some personal reflections.

THE TEACHER-MOM

Precy^[1] is a high school science teacher in a small town in Pangasinan. She is in her mid-30s and married to an accountant who works in Manila. They have two children — Marian, nine years old at grade four level and Jeremy, seven years old and in grade two. Both of their children belong to a SPED class for gifted children. I came to know Precy through a common friend whom I asked to refer me to a teacher who is also a parent of an honor pupil. Jeremy is the top student in his class of gifted students.

1 This is a pseudonym. I am not using the real names of my research participants.

Precy said that she studied her two children very closely until she finally discovered the best way to support Jeremy's study habits. She said that, while Marian wants to be closely supervised and be told what to do, what works best for Jeremy is to be given more freedom and space. Precy's system of supporting her children's schooling work is quite regimented. She imposes some rules like children can watch television and use the computer only when she is at home. The tablets can be used only during weekends. The moment she comes home, she would immediately inquire about the assignments and projects her children need to work on. Homework is done right after dinner. The children are also required to read a book every night.

When she knows that she has to be out of town to attend a conference, for example, she would ask her husband to file a leave to supervise their children's school work. She is thinking that, in the future when her children go to college, they would study in a good school in Manila like University of the Philippines or Miriam College. Though most parents in her town would send their children to Baguio for college education, Precy chose Manila since her husband is there to guide their children. During Card Day which entails a teacher-parent conference, Precy would file a leave so she can go to her children's school to receive their report card and discuss concerns with the class adviser.

Her son, Jeremy, has been getting the top honor award since Kindergarten, but now, his position is being threatened by the coming of a new pupil, Ryan. He was the first honor pupil in his previous school. Precy said that Ryan comes from a well-off family since his father is a seaman and his mother is a doctor. She does not want her son to be disadvantaged and be dislodged from his current position due to unfair treatment. She related about her own experience in grade school when she knew all the while that she was counted among the top honors in her class. However, when recognition day came, she was placed at a much lower rank. She cried a lot when she discovered what was done to her. She reasoned that such injustice happened to her because her parents were not a teacher, a mayor, or a congressman. She described her parents as poor and ordinary vendors. Now, as a teacher, she makes sure that she treats her students fairly no matter what their social status is.

I KNOW THE CURRICULUM (FORMAL, HIDDEN, AND THE EXTRACURRICULAR)

Precy's general parental involvement typifies Lareau's description of a middle-class parent. However, her approach of studying the learning style of her children and imposing a regimented study period at home reflects her professional training as a teacher. She admitted that her knowledge of the finer details of the new K-12 curriculum is another advantage.

The curriculum has three forms — the explicit or formal curriculum, the extracurricular activities, and the hidden curriculum. Dewey would refer to all of these as the “collateral curriculum” (Massialas, 1996). The curriculum guides, courses offered, syllabi, tests, and statements of teachers of what they want to be learned are manifestations of the explicit curriculum. The implicit or hidden curriculum is reflected in the “incidental interaction between students and the physical, social, and the environments of the school.” The extracurriculum is seen through various activities like sports, clubs, governance, and the student newspaper (Sadker & Sadker, 2001).

Bourdieu described children coming from the “dominant class” as more school ready and are more likely to succeed in school because there is a continuity between the kind of speech, style of social interaction, and aesthetic orientation at home and that of the school. The content of the lesson including the way it is taught is already familiar to them. In contrast, for children from the working class, the school will be alien and hostile to them (Goldthorpe, 2007). Such correspondence of the home and the school is described by social reproductionist theorists like Bowles and Gintis, Apple, Anyon, and Giroux as the “hidden curriculum” which is meant to reproduce social inequality (Kentli, 2009). Hidden curriculum was first popularized by Philip Jackson. He established that grade school pupils “learn to live with ‘crowds,’ ‘praise,’ and ‘power.’” Many of the rewards and punishments given are based on mastery of the hidden curriculum, but they are presented as if they are the results of academic achievement (or mastery of the explicit curriculum) (cited in Massialas, 2003). Part of the hidden curriculum is acquisition of survival skills, the most important of which involves relating with authorities like teachers. Associated with it are expressions like “apple polishing the teacher” and “teacher’s pet” (Massialas, 1996). The hidden curriculum can be also analyzed in the microsocial structure of the classroom — the rules and authority of the teacher, teacher–student relationship, the

language, materials, and systems used by the teacher (Kentli, 2009). Middle-class parents and children would align themselves with the gatekeeping processes, attempting to discover the “rules of the game” that would prove to be advantageous to the children (Lareau, 2003).

Precy admitted that being a teacher places her at an advantageous position as a parent because she knows the curriculum including the grading system. She cited how she assisted Jeremy with the new learning area of the K-12 curriculum—the Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE). This new approach proves to be extra challenging because she has trained her children to be more proficient in English and Filipino, a requirement of the old curriculum. Now with the new K-12 curriculum, Jeremy has to demonstrate proficiency in writing in Ilokano (the language of learning in her school district). To fulfill the school work for MTBMLE, Precy had to use Google a lot for translation and language resources. She would ask her mother for support, especially in translating difficult Ilokano words. She is happy that Jeremy is now able to write in Ilokano.

Precy and the other teachers I interviewed stressed the value of supporting their children with their assignments, projects, and extracurricular activities. Precy emphasized that the moment she enters the house in the afternoon, the first thing she would find out is if there is something that she needs to buy from the market. The market closes early in the afternoon, so she has to make sure that her children have what they need for their school projects. She works closely with her children as they do their homework in the evening which would sometimes last until 11:00pm. The academic load for the gifted classes is often very heavy. At one time, Marian had to do 10 book reviews in two weeks. Precy came up with some sort of an idea organizer to make it easy for her daughter to complete her assignment. It was a pedagogical device that teachers use in scaffolding learning. At one time, she found that Marian had dozed off without completing her assignment and so she did it herself, copying the penmanship of her daughter.

Guarding the decimal places

Participation in extracurricular activities is counted for the computation of grades that will determine one’s rank in the honor roll. Pupils will be ranked using the 7–3 point scheme, 7 points for academic performance and 3 points for cocurricular activities (Luistro, 2012). The intention of

including cocurricular activities is to ensure that pupils develop holistically. The Department of Education (DepEd) has come to call these activities as “cocurricular” to show how they are to complement the formal curriculum. Cocurricular performance covers the achievement of the candidates at all levels (school, division, regional, national, and international) in five areas: a) Contests and Competitions, b) Student Leadership, c) Campus Journalism, d) Officership and Membership, and e) Participation or Attendance (ibid).

Teacher Belle, who teaches in a science high school, says that parents are very keenly involved in guarding the computation of points in cocurricular activities. She thinks that computation of academic performance is often beyond question and so it is in the allocation of points in cocurricular activities that is subjected to parental scrutiny. If, for instance, a group earned a certain number of points in a contest, the school would equally divide the points, so each one gets a fair share. She concluded: “*Kaya medyo masalimuot po magcompute ng honors. Mas maganda kung solo category contests po kasi solo po ng bata ang points*” (So it is complicated to compute grades for ranking for honors. It is better if it is a solo category contest because the child gets all the points).

She detailed below how the school strives to avoid conflicts with parents.

“Usually to avoid complaints from parents, we are very careful in distributing our activities. *Ayaw po naming may magsabi na may pinili po kami o “inaalagaan”* (We do not want that people will say that we have special preference or we are giving special treatment.). So far, this has worked for us. We have not received any complaints.”

In addition, we make it a point to have a conference with the parents of the top 20 students of each year level, especially on the 4th quarter *kasi po kung minsan yung top 10 ay nalalaglag pa sa honors* (because sometimes the top 10 fall off from the honor list). During the teacher–parent conferment, we lay out all the records so that the grades of each child are clearly understood and they see how the numbers are computed. And so they cannot complain that we are not transparent, etc. We even let them compute.

The many DepEd policies that came out about the guidelines on the selection of honor students cover specific points in the selection process that become the source of tension and controversies. For this paper, the author selected DepEd Order 22 s. 2003, DepEd Order 6 s. 2005, DepEd Order 74 s. 2012, and DepEd Order 36 s. 2016 to review how the policy on selection of honor students has been expanded and has become too detailed to solve potential conflicts. The following are few of the many changes:

- In 2003 and 2005, the computation of grades for academic excellence shall be up to two decimal places, but in 2012, it was changed to three decimal places.
- Beginning in 2005, the allocation of points for cocurricular activities has become more defined, specified for every level, every type of event, position, and extent of participation. In 2012, it was required that certified true copies of all documents and evidentiary requirements must be submitted and validated.
- In 2003, there were no specific guidelines for the honor selection committee, except that it is to be headed by the principal. In 2005, it was qualified that any teacher who is related within the second degree of affinity or consanguinity to any honor candidate cannot join the committee. In 2012, the rule regarding degree of affinity/consanguinity is applied to all members of the committee. There should also be three members of the selection committee from the teaching staff. The approval of the list of honors can be done by the principal and/or school division superintendent. Furthermore, the candidates for honors and their advisers must be present during the selection process.
- In 2003, the filing of protest shall be settled at the division level. In 2005, it can be filed at the principal's office by the candidates and their parents/guardians and be settled at the district (elementary) and division level (secondary). In 2012, settling of protests should be done by the selection committee.
- In 2018, the policy for awards and recognition for K-12 has totally changed the former system. Forced ranking of individual awardees was minimized with the awarding of honors to any pupil who reached the average grade range for a given category (highest, high, with honors). However, the computation of grades became more complicated because of the new categories of award and the inclusion of evaluation from

peers (This K-12 awarding system was not yet enforced during data gathering).

Precy said that she felt worried with the coming Ryan because he could potentially threaten her son's top ranking in the class. She felt that, because she might not be able to meet the financial requirements of certain cocurricular activities, Jeremy might lose the race. She is also aware that teachers can be vulnerable to "under the table" transactions. She said that, to ensure fairness, she might have to ask Jeremy's teachers to redo the computation of grades when needed.

THE HYPERINFLATING EDUCATIONAL MARKET

Jeremy has been able to participate in cocurricular activities, specifically math competitions, up to the division level. Precy said that she had to provide all the support Jeremy needed like hiring a math coach when the contest reaches the division level. At the school and district levels, Precy can still manage to do the coaching. Teacher Belle mentioned that math coaching fees can go up to 400 pesos per hour. While other regular pupils in the school are provided free textbooks, pupils in the SPED gifted class are required to buy their own textbooks. The textbooks plus the materials for projects and the amount spent for cocurricular activities add up to the financial burden of parents. A costume for a dance competition, for example, would cost at least 1000 pesos.

Precy has found ways to monitor the activities of her son's competitor (Ryan), and she has become aware that Ryan's parents have been sending Ryan to a nearby city to undergo Kumon math tutorial. She was contemplating about the cost of the next competition that her son and his competitor would join. Her coteachers said that she should apply for a loan from GSIS so that she has some money to spend for the competition. As she and her husband think about the future educational needs of their children, her husband is suggesting the idea of going abroad to work as an Overseas Foreign Worker (OFW).

Teacher Belle described the extreme measures and forms of manipulations that parents had to do like giving gifts and harassing the teacher as means to secure their children's higher education. She said: "... *patayan talaga sa grades kasi ang aming top 10 historically po ay napapapunta*

talaga sa top schools with full or half scholarships kaya gusto talaga nilang makasama sa honors ang mga anak nila” (...people “kill” for the grades because historically our top 10 honor students end up in top schools with full or half scholarships that is why they want their children to be included in the list).

This observation about the ultimate intention of parents seems to align with Demerath’s (2009) observation about how “academic arms race” is linked to the students’ aspirations for college. In the American setting, the desired goal is to enable children to land into Ivy League universities.

However, the educational economics in the Philippines, especially among the families of teachers, is slightly different. The goal is simply to ensure that their children get quality education at an affordable price. Teacher Cely, another teacher I interviewed, expressed the financial difficulty of sending her children to school, given her meager teacher salary. She is supporting her children singlehandedly since she and her husband have separated. She is trying her best to give all the support that she could give so that her children would qualify in a state-supported science high school and, later, in a state university. Teacher Cely chose such schools because of the high quality of instruction, and these are the only schools she could afford to pay. She found out one day that most pupils who qualified in a nearby science high school had to undertake classes in some choice review centers, charging at least 1000 pesos per session. She could only afford to send her son to take four review sessions. She is aware that other parents are able to pay for more sessions. To compensate, she developed her own regimen to prepare her son for the science high school screening process. Her son cooperated, but both of them got sick and had to undergo medications.

Such intensity of parental involvement can be situated in a particular socioeconomic structure. Many authors wrote about parental anxiety as linked to economic uncertainties and decreasing wealth of the middle class.

Thailand and Malaysia are allocating 40% and 28%, respectively, of total public spending to education, allotting 7.4% (Malaysia) and 4% (Thailand) of their GDP for education, as reported by UNESCO. In contrast, the Philippines spends only 17.2% of total public expenditure and only 3.3% of the GDP on education (Del Rosario-Malonzo, 2007). The decreasing state support to state-run educational institutions and increasing privatization and commercialization of education are because of the deregulation of all industries, including higher education institutions. Republic Act 7722 (Creating the Commission of Higher Education) grants autonomy to private institutions, so they can easily increase

tuition fees. According to CHED's data, tuition fees from 1998–2006 increased by 119.49%. For a given period, the yearly increase is almost 15%. The ever-inflating tuition fees have been dramatized by the bankruptcy of preneed industries in the year 2005 (Olea, 2007).

The deregulation of industries and allowing market mechanisms to steer prices of goods and services were presented as the means to improve quality of services at a lower price. However, what has happened in the Philippines is the opposite. A classic case is how the deregulation of the energy industry failed to lower the price of energy because energy companies, instead of competing against each other, have formed a cartel. And so there seems to be complicity between the market and the state at the detriment of the citizens/consumers.

The state due to the pressure of western financial institutions has clipped its regulating power and has virtually “abandoned” the Filipino families to the merciless forces of the neoliberal market. As a result, families are left to their own resources and have to compete fiercely with each other over the dwindling resources available. In addition, they have to pay more for review centers and services of tutors and coaches. They also have to deal with emotional and health-related cost due to burnout and exhaustion.

Teachers, short of economic capital, would leverage their cultural and social capital to provide quality education to their children. The details about the cultural capital of teachers are a guarded secret. Precy said that she knew the workings of the curriculum but she would not talk about the details. They would describe such knowledge in vague terms like “helping” (with quotation marks). One teacher narrated that she knows of a teacher-adviser who gave her child a 99% grade in homeroom, but she qualified that such happens once in a blue moon. Most teachers would cloak their advantageous position by resorting to the rhetoric of teachers as overworked workers, too exhausted, and cannot spare time to help their children at home. The privileged position of the teacher and the perception of politicking in the selection of honor students have created a tension and sense of distrust between parents and teachers. The changes in the policy of selection of honor students allude that the tension and controversy is a national phenomenon. One teacher said that their children have to work harder to prove that they deserve the ranking that they get. The following exchanges expose the struggle further:

Teacher 1: *I am worried because my child will be in grade 5 next year and I am the adviser of her class. Although I know that I am fair*

and honest, I am also thinking what other parents might think. I do not want to hear that my child received the first honor because I was the teacher.

Teacher 2: *It is better if they place my child in another section. I want to be proactive and avoid malicious talks. My child will be the one to suffer if trouble erupts (magkagulo)...my child had such experience in the past and it took a while before he recovered. By God's grace, my child is still excelling in school.*

Teacher 1: *Kaya nga po malamang di na ako adviser ng section 1 next year. Ayoko namang ibaba po ng section anak ko. Ako na lang po (Most likely I will relinquish my role as class adviser next year. I do not want to place my child at a lower class section. I will just be the one to suffer).*

Such adversarial actions seek to reproduce the unquestioned given: that teacher-parents and parents are competitors and adversaries, fighting fiercely to grab their share of scarce resources. Neoliberal policies, with their emphasis on choice and individual responsibility, have reinforced an independent action that seeks to make the correct “choices,” to minimize risk and ensure positive outcomes. And one’s choice carries it with a new set of responsibilities (Cuchiarra, 2013).

RESISTING THE “DOXA” AND EXPOSING THE REAL FOES

Bourdieu calls such unquestioned given as the “doxa” or the “orthodox” belief that is often “below the threshold of discourse and opinion.” It is something unspoken and demands “unconscious submission to the demands of social order” (Crossley & Roberts, 2004). The role of critical pedagogy is to challenge such orthodoxy, exposing that, in the scheme of things, the real fight is not parents vs. teacher-parents. The real adversary is the state and the market. The state has abandoned its role as the steward of the educational needs of its subjects and become complicit to the profit-hungry and predatory educational market. The state and the market have set up the parents not only to “kill” each other but also to “kill” their children by subjecting them to a punishing regimen, allowing the logic of the market marked by cut-throat competition to invade their home and lifeworld. The

intense competition which requires the deployment of various capitals also excludes the poor who do not have access to such capitals thus reproducing inequality.

However, the parents and teachers are not completely willing subjects. Practicing their agency, they used compelling cultural resources like childhood memories to reimagine their identities as teachers and parents in new “figured worlds” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Precy, reflective of her own childhood experience of injustice, made a vow that she will give the grade that every student deserves, no matter what his/her social class is. When she receives a *pasalubong* like chocolates from an OFW parent, she would remind the student, “*Walang bearing sa grade ito, ha*” (Let me remind you that this has no bearing on your grades). And reflecting on her son’s plight as he competes with a more privileged classmate, Precy said that, in case her son loses, she would remember that an honor award is not the only measure of one’s intelligence. Teacher Cely said that, as she sees the resources that well-to-do families have to boost their children’s academic performance, she has come to recognize the value of top performing students who come from poor families. She has come to admire them more because they are able to perform well despite of the lack of educational resources. Teacher Belle talked about parents who are genuinely concerned about other children not their own. They would offer their cars and drive the children to places to do their research work. Other parents open their homes for groups of pupils who are working on their research or projects. Teachers offer their services for free tutorial work, and they find ways (like utilizing the profit earned from the canteen) to finance the travel cost of students who will join competitions at various levels.

CONCLUSION

I have used the term “killing” to demonstrate the intensity of competition in schools. I have heard of many bizarre stories about what parents and students would do to get ahead, but I have not heard of any actual act of killing. The closest probably was this incident in a science high school where pupils mixed poison in the drinking water of a classmate. Writing this paper has made me remember some painful memories about competition. I came from a small private elementary school, but for high school, I qualified for the top section of a laboratory high school of a state university. My classmates were mostly

valedictorians from various public schools. I remember the horror of seeing how my classmates would backbite just to get ahead. I eventually asked the school to transfer me to a lower section. For a long time, I thought that such was a loser's choice.

This study made a modest effort to analyze parental involvement of teachers. Using Bourdieu's concepts of capital and social reproduction, this study revealed that teachers as parents are supposed to be able to negotiate more skillfully in the educational realm given the set of capital and knowledge of the various forms of curriculum. Lareau (2003) mentioned in general terms that parents' occupational and educational status influence parental involvement. This paper situates such dynamic in the specific context of the work and professional training of teacher-parents. The specific sociohistorical-economic context in the Philippines — hyperinflating educational market, the dwindling support from the state, and the meager teacher salary — all reinforce a certain hypervigilant parenting that will ensure access to quality yet affordable education for their children. However, teacher-parents are not alone in the pursuit for quality and affordable education as other parents are also competing for the same access. Reproducing the distorted social structures would entail parents, teachers, and nonteachers to play their role as adversaries and competitors. However, critical pedagogy offers an alternative vision of resistance and cultural production through the formation of communities, collaborative efforts, and reimagining of identities. Critical pedagogy would also entail deconstructing orthodoxy to reveal the real foes, to demand that the state reclaims its stewardship over its youth's education, and to regulate the predatory market. Such moves will make schools more meritocratic, safer for children, and less prone to inequity.

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