Preliminary findings

The COFI model aims to spark and sustain long term community engagement of lower-income parents by having them engage in parent leadership trainings. Trainings take a distinct form within each community group across the state. But despite this variation, common among the parents I have interviewed is the way the process makes them feel. Parents feel safe, welcomed, and needed, among a range of other emotions. These emotions are a key means by which they validate, and feeling validated in, their standing in society. As Butterfly said: “When I’m here I matter.” At COFI, parents engage in a process of political education that includes many social and political issues, that takes place with other parents facing similar socio-economic situations in their everyday and often precarious lives. Parents become educated about the very institutions and social relationships that have served to oppress them. They also learn that it is not their fault that they work tirelessly to exit poverty, but cannot. Recognizing there are laws and policies that hinder their progress and that of their children, parents form unique bonds with one another in the hope of together improving their communities at the same time they improve their own lives. They learn, in other words, how to connect personal troubles with public issues, by developing a sense of their own importance and capacity. This memo will expand on the process of becoming politically educated and what this looks like on the ground for parents at COFI. I will also describe how becoming politically educated translates to parents’ family lives.
Next are my first reflections about preliminary themes from interviews with 22 parents and initial field observations. My research has focused on understanding how community organizing shapes family lives and vice versa although much of my focus in this memo is on the first part of the question. Please note I use the term COFI parents and leaders interchangeably and all names are pseudonyms.

**Political Education**

**Becoming liberated.** Relevant to my study is the work of Paulo Freire, who coined the concept of *critical consciousness*. According to Freire, critical consciousness is the ability to recognize oppression (social, political and economic) and to take actions towards dismantling it. Freire recognizes the social “process of knowing,” which is born from dialogue with others and yields liberation from oppressors (Freire and Macedo 1995:379). As Freire said: “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire 2014: 49).

The “education-centered approach to advocacy” is highly effective because it combines knowledge with civic action in a systematic, also solidarity-building manner (Brown-Nagin 1999:97). I argue that COFI expands on this education-centered approach by not only educating parents about their rights and helping them to exercise those rights, but by also providing spaces for parents to set concretely achievable personal and family goals. A substantial part of parents’ politicized education involves *collectively imagining* their current situations in a different light, no matter how implausible this may seem. During the Self, Family, Team training, a six week program led by other parents, participants brainstorm together their ten year group community vision where they list all the components that would make their communities thriving places to
raise their children. Parents write down actionable goals and together come up with strategies to make these visions a reality. In these spaces, parents come to see their group power to transform their communities. After being told countless times during trainings that “state representatives work for you,” parents begin to recognize their own voices as channels of change.

**Demanding Input in their Children’s Education.** During a focus group, parents discussed how before becoming involved in COFI they believed school administrators and teachers always knew what was best for their children. Annette Lareau describes this very idea when she writes about how children have different childhood experiences depending on the social class and economic situation of their parents. In Lareau’s foundational study (2003; 2011), middle class parents were very involved in their children’s schooling, maintaining ongoing relationships with their children’s teachers. However, low-income and working-class parents in her study did not—likely because of their employment instability but also because these parents fully trusted teachers’ capabilities as educators and professionals. Interestingly, COFI parents said they used to adhere to this professionals-know-best rationale; but, as they became more involved in their communities, parents realized no one had students’ best interest in mind like a parent would their own child. Parents shared two examples that illustrate how they questioned “expert” knowledge. Abby said she confronted a school principal after he was dismissive of her complaint regarding her kindergarten son being bullied. “Yes bullying does exist at this age” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. She not only demanded he recognize the bullying that was happening to her son, but she also pushed for bullying prevention education for younger children at this school by talking to other parents about the existence of bullying in kindergarten. Another parent said she advocated for a bilingual education program in her children’s school until it
became a reality. It was her hope that her children could thrive speaking English and Spanish in a supportive learning environment and she felt this was the best way to achieve it.

COFI parents, many of whom did not finish high school, have a plethora of financial concerns, including housing instability and for some, homelessness. These and other circumstances have often been used by academics to explain in part why lower-income or working class parents are not as involved in their child’s education or their development of free-time play—Lareau (2003) even acknowledges the “deadening of quality work” in her study and how this impacts parent involvement. Recently, Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer (2015) point out the rarity of stable work for the poorest Americans, which has worsened in the past decade and a half. Welfare reform not only stripped the poorest families of a cash safety net but it also created a larger pool of low-wage workers in an already competitive employment economy. The low-wage jobs workers are able to juggle often come with no benefits or stability and often expose workers to increased health risks. Of the COFI parent I have interviewed, only one parent had a full time job (Claudia who worked at Wamart). Other than Claudia, parents had intermittent opportunities for work. A handful of parents worked as Food or Head Start Ambassadors-- programs that were funded through COFI by the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois—where they worked anywhere from 4 to 12 hours a week for $10-$15 an hour.

In contrast to the stories that Lareau and Edin tell, COFI parents, financial uncertainties, including the lack of quality work opportunities, does not hinder their participation in their children’s lives. Butterfly knows the exact score on her daughter’s most recent standardized exam and she knows the type of music her daughter likes down to the lyrics. Diane has volunteered for over 10 years at her children’s schools and considers some of her children’s teachers as family. Through their continued involvement in leadership development trainings and
consequently in their children’s schools, parents also learned of the proper channels to share their grievances, bolstering their self-confidence as rights-bearing parents.

Knowing rights. Parents not only felt more comfortable in talking with people from other cultures and with school administrators, after the training but they also felt more confident when they knew their rights. For instance, parents talked about their right to volunteer in their child’s school for 10 hours a week or two hours a day. Whether or not they practiced this right from week to week, they knew they could do so, which gave them some peace of mind. During an interview, Cindy said she learned of her right to contact her local representatives when she had community concerns. She exercised this right when she called her Alderman and asked him why there was no grass on her block like there were on other blocks. Her Alderman replied: “No one had asked for it before.” Within weeks, her block had green grass adjacent to the sidewalk. Get-It-Right, an affiliate parent who attended COFI workshops but who had not participated in the parent leadership trainings, said he learned about his rights as a father through his community involvement in organizing. Get-it-Right went to Springfield during MOMS on a mission and helped to advocate for a child support bill that would allocate more money towards children instead of being dissipated into the child support services system. He also learned that he could door knock and create petitions in order to create change in his community, which were strategies he used to help bring a new playground to his block. Parents became more outspoken about their needs in their communities because they realized that if they did not, then who would?

ORGANIZING PARENT LIVES

I am finding that when parent leaders are involved in their communities through organizing, it serves multiple purposes beyond the explicit organizing goals they are trying to
accomplish. Learning about and sharing information was widely discussed among parent leaders as an important component of organizing. Parents also described unexpected educational aspects to organizing-- very low income parents learn skills and information that helps them in other areas of their lives. There are interpersonal aspect to organizing as parents shared how they and others in their family recognize the ways their self-esteem and confidence has improved since they became involved in their communities (Claudia, Maria, Butterfly, Alma, Red, Diane, Flisha, Rosita, Victoria, Lulu). Parents, many of whom, have grown up in distressed neighborhoods with widespread poverty and violence, feel accepted, recognized, and less judged when they work in groups in their communities (“When I’m here I matter”- Butterfly). Lastly, there is a respite component to organizing, meaning that as parents become involved in their communities, they step away from their daily emotional and financial struggles-- if only momentarily (Rosa, Claudia, Bug, Butterfly, Alma, Flisha, Rosita, Victoria, Lulu). Parents describe the ways stress, anxiety and worries begin to dissipate when they are concentrating on specific tasks or just sharing a meal with the group during an organizing meeting. The following paragraphs describe these often overlapping themes more thoroughly.

**Information sharing.** Seventeen parents explicitly said community organizing provided a source of information they often shared with others outside of their groups. For instance, Abby and Victoria said they shared information with other community and family members on a regular basis to help support others’ needs. The type of information shared ranged from community programs, available workshops, and parent rights, to immigration and citizenship questions-- and everything in between. Spontaneous said she reached out to a co-chair of the Elementary Justice campaign when her grandson was jumped at school to get advice about how to approach administrators. Virginia, despite only having a second grade education and just two
years of involvement in organizing, has been coined the “political one” in her family as extended family members call her when they need legal advice or information about available resources. Virginia told me about how she met another mom at the bus stop and talked about the community forum she had recently held with her team members (Padres Lideres Activos). She exchanged contact information with this mom who was very interested in hearing more about COFI’s parent training program and about future events. For any other person this exchange might have been uneventful. But knowing how Virginia had only just recently overcome her fear of riding the bus after living in the US for 25 years, how she used to be scared to talk to strangers, and how she used to think she knew nothing because of her limited formal education, this interaction was a paramount display of her newfound leadership abilities in her community and it made her grin from ear to ear.

Gaining Self-Esteem and Belonging. COFI parents described interpersonal aspects of organizing with a most common theme of “coming out of their shell” and feeling a sense of solidarity with other parents. Parents described talking to legislators as proud moments where they represented their communities in a way they never imagined. Flisha, once a special education student herself, said COFI made her feel “good” and “welcomed.” Victoria said COFI helps her meet people, particularly people she can relate to on many issues that are from different races. Fabio said he is now an extrovert because of his involvement in COFI. Claudia says she sticks up for herself now at work and is more confident because she knows her rights after talking to other parents. Lulu, a survivor of severe domestic violence that led her to almost take her own life, described empowerment as “yes you can,” and said as a training leader she had parents look in the mirror every day and tell themselves they could do it, whatever their goal may be. Cindy said COFI trainings give her credibility in the community and have encouraged her to
reach out to legislators about issues on her block in Lawndale. Alma said her most memorable moment at COFI was when her parent training leader told her she was a good leader and when she realized she was not afraid to talk to people in different communities while doing outreach.

**Respite.** Fourteen parents I interviewed described organizing as a form of respite or longer-term healing from their difficult lived experiences, mainly surrounding violence and poverty. Many COFI parents saw their involvement in organizing as a way to participate in a support group where they could share troubles and issues with other parents with the goal of finding solutions together. Rosa said she organized to “get things off her mind” like her husband's DUI and the fact that she was getting evicted from the home and can no longer afford to live in her gentrifying neighborhood. Rosita, a grandmother who travels 1.5 hours on the bus to go to COFI meetings says COFI is a way to destress and keep busy. Estrella also says she feels less stressed after attending an organizing meeting where she feels she “belongs” and receives the “tools to cope with issues.” Estrella has long been involved in organizing and has attended rallies in Springfield and Washington DC with other groups concerning immigration, driver’s license rights for undocumented populations and other social justice issues. She finds COFI’s model of organizing more helpful for connecting to other parents since according to her, the grassroots community outreach her group has done is slow moving. Abby said her most memorable moment at COFI occurred while she was in the Self Family Team training and she could share with other parents without feeling judged.

**Informal Education.** COFI parents talked about organizing with COFI as a way of furthering their informal education. Attending workshops and COFI sponsored trainings helped them in other areas of their lives beyond organizing; it helped them to be better prepared for job interviews and handling situations at home. For example, Red described how her public speaking
has improved because of COFI’s trainings and she also said that during a job interview she was able to provide examples of how she worked in a team while at COFI, when asked about prior a prior team experience. Parents also described restorative justice trainings as helpful because it gave them the tools to encourage their own kids to resolve sibling conflicts peacefully. Moreover, Spontaneous mentioned being grateful for participating in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) training (for special education students), since she could now support parents going through the IEP process. She also described receiving a Mental Health Training Certificate where she learned about different trauma based mental health conditions faced by people in her community.

**ORGANIZING FAMILY**

Interviews with parents suggest that COFI’s family-focused organizing model transcends beyond the goals of community organizing and into parents’ family lives. Parents describe reduced stress levels which translate to more patience with their children (Butterfly, Red), less yelling (Lulu, Victoria; Fabio, Estrella). They describe having better communication with their families as a result of being able to deal with stress in a healthier manner (also I would argue because they feel better about themselves in general). Some leaders also shared how their children are setting their own goals and are involved in their communities as a result of seeing them involved in the community. Finally, although for the most part, parents felt supported by their significant other and children, there are notable ways in which organizing created struggles within the family (Victoria, Rosa, Alma, Estrella, and Abby), particularly for recent immigrant mothers.

**Patience and Communication with Children.** Seventeen parents have described having better communication with their self-defined families, including being able to have conversations
about politics, sharing information about resources, and talking about their personal and family goals. Twelve parents describe having a better relationship with their children since becoming involved in community organizing. Victoria, Lulu and Fabio say that since they started with COFI they yelled less at their children and spent more quality time with them. Putting aside her own financial and health troubles, Butterfly says she now asks her daughter about her day and listens to her concerns. Similarly, Diane shared she communicates better with her 15 year old since attending COFI. During a focus group last year, a parent shared their daughter suggested she “go to COFI” when she saw her in a distressed state. Abby says she has more patience with her young son since she becoming involved with COFI and has gotten more involved in his school. These newly practiced skills came from discussions with other parents, trainings, and the realization that they were exerting their stress and frustration onto their children which would eventually push them away. At least three moms said they learned to simply tell their kids they love them more often.

**Family conflict.** Although many parents gained skills that helped their relationships at home, some parent leaders did not always have positive responses from their partners or children as a result of their organizing and their time away from home. Rosa, Alma, Estrella (and Kim-affiliate) all described having at one point strained relationships with their families, in part because of their involvement in organizing. For instance, Abby’s husband said he felt “neglected” and he wanted her to spend more time with him. Estrella and Virginia’s daughters told them they should not go to meetings unless they were getting paid, to which Virginia responded that the education and resources she is receiving from COFI are priceless. Lastly, Estrella’s husband sometimes hides the car keys to prevent Estrella from leaving the house. But,
this does not stop her from being involved in marches, meetings, and her Zumba instructing, which she considers as therapeutic for the community.

Family interactions of COFI parents were of course gendered. Alma’s husband had a very “machista” way of viewing a woman’s “place” as belonging in the home. Her husband did not want Alma to leave the house to say the least, even to get groceries, attend a parent training, or much less learn to drive. Thus, when Alma began becoming involved in COFI when her daughter entered Kindergarten, there were tensions and it took years for Alma to be able to “convince” her husband she was not doing anything wrong. Fifteen years later, Alma says her husband called her a changed woman because of COFI, highlighting her rebellion against extreme domesticity. She said she is involved in her community and has contested against solely being a stay at home mom because she wants to set an example for her daughters.

Victoria shared how her husband views women as inferior to men and how she can only be a leader in her home so long as she is beneath her husband. Leadership in this case had everything to do with exerting masculinity because of a breadwinning status and little to do with the fact that Victoria took care of their four children, one of which was severely disabled, and another who had a learning disability. Victoria too knows the meaning of hard work; she worked in an appetizer factory for many years and then at Bloomingdale where she was in charge of cleaning eight floors during an overnight shift. Despite knowing little English, Victoria has won a lawsuit concerning her daughter’s condition, she has secured a new fully accessible mini-van to transport her daughter to and from school, and she has fought for all of her children to have equal educational opportunities at school. When she went to Springfield for the first time this past May, her husband told her it was “a waste of time.” When she returned with a video, pictures, and testimonies from one of her daughters about their experience in the capitol and how they
talked to state representatives, her husband finally said he was proud of Victoria and asked to come along the trip next year.

Kim (NON-COFI) shared a unique perspective because she had no children and because she was not trained by COFI but rather participated in a myriad of organizing decades ago around farm workers’ rights, post-Apartheid relations and anti-war. She said that although her parents were supportive of her organizing (they died young), her sisters and some friends were “dismissive” of her work. Organizing either strengthened relationships or made them weaker, said Kim. Perhaps the greatest example of straining a relationship is when she was organizing a lettuce strike and she attended a wedding where her friend told her she would have to “forget the strike and eat her salad.” Moreover, Kim said her sister never attended her organized events or showed interest in her work, which really hurt her. “I always attended her children’s birthday parties” she reasons, as she describes how this distanced them. Kim also shared that as a childless woman who also was not married, she had “no stops” and organizing often consumed her life; people would call at all hours of the night, randomly ask to crash in her couch; and she would be assigned tasks that were attractive to parents. “Organizers with kids are forced to take breaks” said Kim, as she recalled how her organizing experience involved being extremely overworked with little or no pay.

**Gaining independence and recognition.** Five mothers described gaining a sense of independence from their husbands since becoming involved in their communities. Several leaders say they no longer ask for permission, instead they communicate their plans in advance. For instance, Alma went from hiding she was attending a parent leadership training program by leaving the phone off the hook, to traveling across the country with COFI for a national conference after communicating the dates and why she wanted to go. Mothers, particularly those
who recently emigrated from Mexico described in detail how they often had to explain at length the activities they were doing within their community organizing in order to get some type of support from their husbands. Virginia said her husband started recognizing her work in the community and with COFI only after she showed him her graduation cords and SFT diploma. Similarly, Abby said that only after she received an award from one of COFI’s community partners and she was interviewed on TV did her husband give her some type of credit and recognition.

**Emerging leaders.** Parent leaders also share how their own children are setting goals for themselves (Butterfly, Red, Claudia). For older children, including adult children of parent organizers, they have been spotted volunteering, or have become more involved in their communities (Ms. J., Red). One of Ms. J’s sons said he was glad he was able to understand that things “could change” as a result of seeing their mom involved in the community for so long. He now is very active in his children’s education and advocates on their behalf regularly. Red said her children asked to volunteer at a shelter and she attributes that to seeing her set an example.

**Methods and Data in Brief**

The data collected so far has consisted of participant observations and one on-one interviews. I have held one-on-one interviews with 22 parents from many community areas in Chicago including but not limited to: Back of the Yards; Little Village; Englewood; Lawndale; Austin; Humboldt Park; Midway; West Lawn; West Town and Aurora (suburb). Five of my respondents said they grew up in Cabrini Green or the Robert Taylor Homes and several mentioned being or having been homeless at some point in their lives. All but two of my respondents are women. Nineteen are COFI parent leaders, one is from a group affiliated with
COFI called Fathers, Healthy Families and Communities, and the other is a former community organizer from the 1960’s that I met when we co-volunteered at COFI’s 20th Anniversary event.

Parents seemed to be very willing to talk about their organizing experiences and their families. However, it seemed some parents did not want to talk at length about their families in terms of interpersonal conflicts and financial hardships although they did talk about their children with ease. Many parent leaders also did not make the connection between how their participation in organizing has shaped their family lives until we started talking about it at length, with others never making the connection themselves. It was most helpful to ask leaders about how family members felt about their involvement in organizing to get to these themes.

Overall, parent leaders had anywhere from one to 16 children, with most having around 4 kids (12 parents had children under 18) and one affiliate did not have any children. Many leaders were grandparents as well. Eight interviewees are Spanish speaking first generation immigrants from Mexico, two are Mexican-American, nine are African American, and two are white. Parents ranged in age from 27 to 73. Concerning their education, three respondents have up to a third grade education, one dropped out at age 16, eleven finished high school or their GED, five have some college experience, and two have their master's degree (one of which was an affiliate). Their community organizing experience with COFI range from one year to 22 years, pre dating to before COFI formed as an organization.

During COFI events, I have participated when I was encouraged to participate, but for the most part have listened. I have attended 43 unique events/meetings/trainings, totaling 134 hours (as of July 15 2016). Much of my fieldwork has included attending a parent leadership training in Evanston (13 events; 28 hours), and participating in a conversation exchange group in Pilsen with parents learning English (7 events; 14 hours). These have been the most consistent
observational components although I have tried to attend as many events as my time permitted. I have attended two parent-run community forums in Pilsen and Little Village where parents shared the results of their outreach efforts after surveying over 100 of their neighbors to find out what issues in their communities are most pressing. At these events, parents also invited an attorney to speak about parents’ rights, particularly for those parents with children with disabilities.

I have also participated in the first phase of COFI’s parent leadership training program, (Self, Family, Team, SFT) and what is often referred to as Phase 1.5, Team Building. My goal in participating in the Evanston training program was to experience the COFI peer parent training model firsthand as a young mother of a biracial two year old.

References


