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Children as Family Brokers, and Members of Digital Learning Teams

I have been conducting research on children's brokering activities for over a decade. In *Kids in the Middle*, I present findings from a four-year ethnographic investigation into how children of Mexican immigrants in South Los Angeles broker language, cultural norms, media, and technology for their parents as the primary English speakers in their families (Katz, 2014a). That research revealed how children's brokering efforts enable families' access to local schools, healthcare facilities, and social services, thereby playing an important—and often overlooked—role in how immigrant families integrate into their adopted communities. Likewise, brokering responsibilities also affect how children learn to transfer skills between settings and interactions, and the choices they make about their own educational trajectories.

Three key findings from *Kids in the Middle* have laid the foundation for my current research. The first is that, although child brokers were usually perceived by professionals (i.e., teachers, doctors, service providers) as independent actors, their brokering efforts were most likely to have the desired results when they worked closely with their parents and/or siblings. This is because when parents collaborate with their child brokers, they bring complementary skills to the table. Children bring their relatively greater familiarity with English, U.S. cultural norms, and new technology. Parents contribute their adult understandings of how the world works and of what their family needs. Because parents and children trade expert and learner roles when they work together to solve problems, these activities are also opportunities for all family members to support each other's learning.

Second, I found that parents and children transfer skills and knowledge from one setting to another whenever possible. One of the benefits of researching families' experiences at home and around the community is that I could see how what families learned from one experience, affected how they prepared for the next one. For example, I observed Graciela (age 13), have a rewarding experience in asking a doctor a series of direct questions to make sure she fully understood what her mother needed to do for her baby sister. That experience made her brave enough to ask a teacher similar clarifying questions when she interpreted for her mom at her brother's parent-teacher conference later that week.

Some brokers transferred skills they had learned in school to other situations. For example, Victoria (age 12) had been taught to read the sentence or paragraph around a word or idea she didn't understand to figure out what it meant. She used this school-learned skill in different community settings when she was faced with confusing words in forms and documents she had to fill out for her family. Her mother had learned this strategy from Victoria, and even used it independently when Victoria wasn't available to help her. Victoria had already learned, however, that not all skills transfer. She told me that she spoke English and Spanish just fine, but that she didn't speak "ancient." Her explanation clarified that she considered formal English—the kind spoken in healthcare and similar settings—to be "ancient," in contrast to the more informal vernacular English that she spoke with confidence. Victoria's observation reveals that parents and children don't operate in a vacuum; families that encountered accommodating

teachers, doctors, and service providers were more likely to have positive, productive outcomes to brokered interactions. Child brokers were also more likely to redeploy strategies from successful interactions in later encounters.

In schools in particular, transferability depended on whether teachers recognize and validate children's brokering. I found that such recognition was unusual. Children were slow to reveal information to teachers, either because doing so exposed their parents' vulnerabilities, or because they hadn't established relationships with teachers that were grounded in what education scholar Angela Valenzuela has called "authentic caring" (1999). And this was where I found a fundamental distinction between my data and those of scholars who have focused on brokering in home and school contexts only, and have reported positive relationships between brokering and children's educational trajectories (see Katz, 2014b for a review). Examining brokering activities in more settings made it clear that these responsibilities often restricted children's access to teachers, and limited their abilities to stay after school for homework help or other enrichment programs.

Finally, almost all research on children's brokering has focused on their cultural and linguistic brokering (see Katz, 2014b). It quickly became clear that scholars' inattention to children's tech brokering was a major gap in the research. Children I observed for *Kids in the Middle* depended on a range of media and technology to support their brokering efforts. Parents' desires to locate information often prompted children's brokering as well, whether they were helping parents use unfamiliar devices, or translating digital content into Spanish. In other words, technology could support brokering activities—and conversely, it could be the impetus for parents needing their children's help.

By the time I completed fieldwork for *Kids in the Middle* in 2009, the media landscape was becoming increasingly digital and mobile. My respondents were among the low-income and minority families cast as being on the "wrong side" of the digital divide. My motivations for interrogating the accuracy of those assumptions was driven by the same core questions as *Kids in the Middle*; that is, my desire to understand how parents and children develop learning strategies to address challenges related to social inequalities (in this case, digital equity specifically), and how these strategies affect family wellbeing and children's developmental trajectories.

Since mid-2013, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, I've worked to understand how parents and children make decisions about adopting technology—and when they do, how they engage with those technologies, independently and collectively, for a variety of formal and informal learning activities. I wanted to understand how technology, wisely deployed, might help to support and deepen the relationships that matter most to children.

The full details of the study design have been detailed elsewhere (e.g., Katz & Gonzalez, 2016), and reports from both study phases can be found on the study website.¹ Stage 1 involved qualitative interviews with 336 parents and children in three U.S. cities: Chula Vista, California; Tucson, Arizona; and Denver, Colorado. The sites were selected because school districts in all three areas serve high-poverty, predominantly Mexican-origin, student populations, and all interviewed families qualified for Connect2Compete (C2C), a national initiative for subsidized broadband aimed at families whose children receive free or reduced-cost school meals. In each school site, my team and I worked with two K-8 schools and had trusted school staff recruit from

¹ See www.digitalequityforlearning.org

randomized list of students. We interviewed 50 to 60 families per site over two to three weeks. Parents and children were interviewed simultaneously but separately, in their language of preference, at either home or school according to their comfort. Parents and children were asked a range of questions about their histories and experiences with technology, family engagement with devices and content, and family routines and practices.

Guided by the interview findings, in Stage 2 my colleagues and I developed a survey instrument which was administered telephonically to a nationally representative sample of 1,191 parents with a child in grades K-8 reporting a household income below the median household income for this demographic.² This is the first nationally representative dataset on technology adoption and engagement that hasn't included lower-income families as simply another subgroup. This focus allows us to zero in on issues of particular importance to lower-income families, including challenges to connectivity and perceptions of children's tech in school, at home, and in the community.

Grounded analyses of Stage 1 data have revealed that parents' and children's engagement with digital technologies not only supports learning activities that occur *through* these media, but also situated learning that is facilitated *by* these media, as they are used to share ideas and information. Communication scholar Lynn Schofield Clark has argued that the interactive nature of new communication technologies enable interactions between adults and children that are more two-way, child-centered, and less defined by hierarchical authority arrangements than was possible in the television age (2011). In many ways, my earlier work on brokering had already established this pattern; when parents actively support their child brokers, those interactions are collaborative and not explicitly hierarchical. And the role of the child is unquestionably central to those interactions.

Because interview findings revealed that children are actively enabling all stages of technology adoption and integration into family life, their brokering in these domains is best understood as one important factor in larger family systems that I am calling *digital learning teams*. With this terminology, my intention is to emphasize the varied forms of collaboration inherent in how parents and children use technology for a range of learning activities. The term is also intended to stress that all members of the family matter, and that how they enable each other has great potential for synergy. I am in the process of conceptualizing a digital corollary to Vygotsky's theory of learning (1978), to detail how parents and children can fluidly exchange expert and learner roles within their interactions, to scaffold each other's skill development and confidence to learn with and through technology.

In these familial collaborations, I consider learning as occurring through relationships, situated activities, and social exchange, in order to emphasize the social qualities of these learning experiences. I am also detailing how settings matter, in two primary ways. The first is in terms of what conditions enable transferable skills and knowledge (both for future collaboration or confident independent use). The second is in terms of what supports others within those locations can provide the family, and how these situated exchanges of skills and knowledge can guide efforts toward more equitable opportunities for children on and beyond school grounds.

Treating families as digital learning teams goes beyond assessments of individual-level digital skills and practices. It emphasizes pragmatism and trust in family members, in their

² The median income for families with one or more child under 18 was slightly under \$65,000 (specifically, \$63,767), according to the Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Table FINC-03 of the Current Population Survey. Retrieved from: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032015/faminc/toc.htm>.

strengths and adaptability as individuals and as a unit, and in how different experiences and literacies converge and have consequences for kids growing up in the Internet age. Considering families as digital learning teams stresses that kids' contributions matter. It also emphasizes that families that are too often considered by their limitations (in income, parental education, etc.), have considerable strengths.

None of this negates the very real social inequalities that low-income and immigrant families experience in the course of their everyday lives, nor does it minimize how those disparities reduce kids' access to educational opportunity in the digital age. What my work does do, however, is establish that these families have considerable assets to leverage, and that they should be treated as serious partners in designing programs and policies to reduce the digital and educational inequities that they are disproportionately likely to experience.

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