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Braiding Cultural Understandings: Reflections of a Teacher Working with Diverse Latino Parents

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Introduction

Strong parental involvement in a child's education and school environment has shown to be essential to the success of the child and the school. Effective parental involvement is an individualized, comprehensive, purposeful, and ongoing process designed to ensure that all parents are connected to the school's culture, purpose, and organization. La Roche and Shriberg (2004) report that high parental school involvement and parenting practices are two family variables shown to have the greatest impact on academic achievement among families of different ethnicities and socioeconomic levels. However, meaningful parental involvement has traditionally eluded schools because school norms and structures have historically been, and to a large part continue to be, most responsive to parents who are middle-class, U.S.- born, and standard-English-speaking individuals (King & Goodwin, 2002; Jiménez, 2002). Although these norms seem firmly well established in most schools, there is an urgent need for schools to become more inclusive of diverse populations as the nation's demographics continue to change.

With increasing numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse students, our schools are faced with the task of serving students and families with limited English skills. Teachers are

challenged with developing effective educational and literacy programs to include the cultural and linguistic diversity of the student population (August, 2006; Prince & Lawrence, 1993; Valencia 2002).

Recently, Latino students have attracted the attention of educators, legislators, and the public in general because Latinos now constitute the largest group of minority students in many U.S. schools, especially in urban areas. Latinos experienced a 59 percent growth rate during the 1990s (Jiménez, 2002). Latino immigrant families also are more likely to live in poverty as compared to other ethnic groups (Capps, Fix, & Reardon-Anderson, 2003). In 2000, the poverty rate for Latinos was 22.5%, compared to 7.7% for non-Hispanic Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Research in the area of poverty indicates children and families living in poverty learn unique ways to cope and survive in their situation creating the equivalent of a new culture (Chafel, 1997; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Jalango, 1996; McLoyd, 1995). Therefore, teachers may need to be equipped with specific knowledge about working with diverse Latino families, coupled with ways to work with Latino families that may also be living in poverty. With growth rates of Latinos predicted to continue increasing in the future, schools are being challenged to strengthen school-home connections and utilize best practices to increase the academic achievements of Latino students who may also be living in poverty (Klein & Chen, 2001; Lynch & Hanson, 2004).

Where do teachers learn how to develop these specialized programs for diverse students? In many of the traditional multicultural classes for undergraduates, differences between the cultures are studied in an attempt to better understand their nuances. However, the problem with this approach is that the undergraduate pre-service teachers may learn stereotypes or

cultural nuances of the ethnic groups, believing individuals within that group are homogeneous in their lifestyles, beliefs, or values. This approach causes confusion when working with diverse student populations in a school setting. In fact, many ethnic groups have many cultural similarities among them, but there are still many differences, especially when working with Latino parents (Nieto, 2004).

This article makes a case for improving the school success of diverse Latino students through the framework of culturally responsive teaching and preparing educators with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to accomplish this goal. The ideas presented here are brief scenarios that have occurred throughout the author's professional experiences in working with Latino families as a teacher and researcher. A case is made for interacting with Latino families in a variety of ways in order to incorporate the student's culture into the curriculum.

This article also addresses culturally biased beliefs many educators may have toward their Latino students and families, as well as a variety of ways schools and parents can work together for the benefit of the students. The goal is for administrators, parents, prospective teachers, and teacher educators to develop an understanding of culturally responsive parental involvement as it relates to working with diverse Latinos.

Gay's (2000) five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching are used as a framework for beginning a paradigm shift: (1) developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, (2) including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, (3) demonstrating caring and building learning communities, (4) communicating with diverse students, and (5) responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction. For the purposes of this article, the term "culturally responsive" is used because it

acknowledges that all families have varied backgrounds, beliefs, and values. The families are evolving, complex, and ever-changing, but they recognize the need to be involved in their children's schools (King & Goodwin, 2002).

Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of diverse students as a way for teaching them more effectively. When academic knowledge and skills are derived from the experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, interesting, and are learned easily (Gay, 2000). As a result, the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students, in particular Latinos, will improve when they are taught using their cultural and experiential filters (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally responsive teaching

Culture can be defined as all aspects of life that influence our thinking and our behavior. Specific facets of culture can include language, education, age, gender, religion, geography, time, health, proximal space, social economic status, and values. Cultural groups differ with respect to values, education, language, roles of family members, problem-solving strategies, views of life and death, attitudes toward education, health, and level of commitment to traditional or nontraditional ways (Okagaki & Diamond, 2000; Klein & Chen, 2001).

The lack of awareness of these differences among Latino families may lead to miscommunications and misunderstandings resulting in unintentional stereotyping in a school setting. Therefore, specific cultural sensitivity and knowledge is essential for providing effective schooling to Latino students, even if the

classroom teacher is from the Latino group. In other words, many Latino teachers may be able to identify with many of the cultural aspects of the Latino culture. However, there may also be areas in which the cultural norm of Latino families may be completely different than the experiences of the Latino teacher due to the teacher's socioeconomic status affecting educational background, Spanish proficiency and literacy, foods and geography—different parts of the U.S., including urban, suburban, and rural areas (Zainuddin, Yahya, Morales-Jones, & Ariza, 2002).

For example, many teachers assume that all Latinos share the same religious beliefs and faith. While many Latinos follow Catholic teachings, they are very diverse in their beliefs. One mother informed me in early December that her religion did not allow for her and the family to celebrate any holidays, including birthdays. Therefore, she asked that I not allow her daughter to participate in the upcoming holiday party. While I had not ever been asked to do this, I felt it was inappropriate in regard to the child's feelings. After all, she would be watching while her classmates played games and ate party foods. I did not feel the student would understand all the implications at her young age. I requested the mother simply pick her daughter up early that day. Because of work commitments, she stated it would not be possible. I then proposed the option of sending her to another classroom with the music teacher. I knew this teacher did not have a homeroom class during our party time. The music teacher and my student ended up playing checkers while the majority of the students participated in their parties. I often think of this situation, and felt I handled it as respectfully as possible. In my years as a classroom teacher, this type of request from Latino parents only increased. The only difference is I now have had the time to reflect on the situation and to offer some options that acknowledge

the parents' requests, while still considering the emotions of the students.

As a researcher, I observed a classroom in which a handful of kindergarten Spanish-speaking students were interacting with a monolingual English-speaking teacher. She was an excellent and experienced teacher with an advanced degree who enjoyed working with English language learners (ELLs). The students were learning to speak English, but still only communicated with their teacher using a beginning level English vocabulary. They were trying to explain to the teacher that one of the students had lost a tooth and that the "Raton" (Rat) would visit and take the tooth in exchange for some money. (This tradition is very similar to the tooth fairy experience in American culture). The teacher did not understand this cultural tradition and could not connect with the students' cultural experiences, and the students did not have enough English vocabulary skills to inform the teacher about their custom. In this case, a well-meaning teacher who lacked cultural knowledge about certain cultural experiences missed an opportunity to use the information in a meaningful way to enhance the learning for her Latino students. This teachable moment could have been used to discuss this custom, as well as reading and writing about many of the students' experiences of losing teeth. A math graph could have been constructed to graph the total number of teeth lost to "The Raton." In addition, the graph could have shown which students in class had lost the most and the least teeth. A trip to the library could have been taken to research other stories and customs about who takes the teeth that are placed under the pillows of many children around the world. These are just a few examples of how a teacher's knowledge of the cultural nuances of the Latino culture can be used in a meaningful way in the classroom (Anderson & Roit, 1998; Zainuddin et al., 2002).

Understanding the linguistic and cultural diversity of Latino families

Many teachers mistakenly assume that all Latinos are “the same” in all elements of culture. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. Latino students and their families are not homogeneous but reflect diversity within the many facets of culture. Cultural differences influence the way students behave, communicate, and learn. It is learned and shared by the family. At an early age, children observe what is valued in their families and communities, and those home values may conflict with those of their school (Zainuddin et al., 2002).

Diversity in language

Language is used for communicating meaning. For many Latino families, Spanish may be the language spoken at home for all purposes. For other families, language may consist of a mixture of some English and Spanish for varying purposes. The important factor for educational purposes is the knowledge of how language is used by Latino families to communicate, taking into consideration some understandings of their discourse (Ibarra, 2004).

As a classroom teacher I learned much from my students and their families, especially new Spanish words. Most teachers believe all Spanish-speaking students and their families speak in the same manner because “Spanish is Spanish.” The reality is that all speak Spanish but may use different words depending on their region of origin. Some parents and their children speak Spanish very fast, while others may speak with a different accent. It is useful for teachers to know where their students come from in order to understand their language better (García, 2002).

Therefore, teachers, even those who speak Spanish, may be able to access this information during parental conferences or home visits.

In my case, I had a situation in which I learned a new Spanish vocabulary word by accident. My students were accustomed to having a short recess in the morning. However, due to strong rains during most of the day, my students and I were stuck indoors for almost an entire day. When the rains subsided in the afternoon, I asked the students if they would like to walk outside to the blacktop for some air and stretching. They, of course, said, "Yes!" I asked them to follow me outside to the blacktop. I requested that they not step in the mud because I did not want mud all over the new carpet in our classroom. I, however, used the word "soquete" for mud. This was the only word for mud my family used. The students said OK and off we went. To my amazement, the students walked directly into the puddles of mud, splashing all the way to the blacktop. I had specifically asked them not to do that. I stopped them and asked why they had deliberately disobeyed me and stepped in the "soquete"? With a puzzled look, one student finally raised her hand and asked, "Teacher, ¿Qué es soquete?" I looked incredulously at her and pointed to the mud all over her shoes. She looked at me and said, "We call that 'lodo' (mud)." No wonder the students didn't obey me; they didn't understand my Spanish word for mud.

In another instance, I understood the importance of sending home letters in Spanish for my students, even as a new teacher. At the time, the school did not provide a school translator for outgoing school correspondence. However, I had a skillful classroom assistant who was very knowledgeable about the Latino culture and their language discourse. She routinely translated the school's correspondence to parents from English to Spanish. On one occasion, I reviewed her translation and became very annoyed with

the manner in which she translated it. It read more like a letter I would have written to my best friend during my teenage years: "Hi, Nora. How are you? When you receive this letter, I hope that you are doing well. As for me and my family, we are fine. Thanks! . . ." The translation did not state: "Dear Parents: The purpose of this letter is to inform you that we will . . ." The school's letter was very direct and to the point. I questioned my assistant's style by indicating that her translation was not a direct translation from the English version being sent out to the other parents. I politely asked her to redo the translation. She, however, very tactfully convinced me to reconsider and leave the letter as she had translated it because the communication style was "friendly." She helped me to see that the English style of communicating is too direct and appears harsh for many Latinos (Zainuddin et al., 2002). If the English communication could be visually depicted, a straight arrow pointing down would be drawn. She would certainly translate the letter as a direct translation from the English version; however, she felt it would not be received well by the parents. In fact, I could be perceived as a cold and distant teacher, which is the last thing I wanted. After all, the translations were aimed at better communicating with Latino parents and establishing a pleasant rapport between school and home. For all the occasions in which we wanted to provide information for parents, the letter started somewhat informally. Then it might proceed in a more technical fashion within the letter, especially for giving specific information. On that day, I learned something very valuable when it came to style or discourse of communicating with Latino parents. It's not what you say, but how you say it. The way you connect with a group is by understanding their language nuances and using this information to improve communications (García, 2002).

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How can the teacher use the information about language in the classroom? First of all, students learn their communication from their language and families and how it is used for communicating purposes. In my case, I discovered if the discourse pattern of my students could be visually illustrated, it would probably resemble a jagged edge—going from one subject to another. When a student was asked to write a story about a special holiday, the tendency was to write as they spoke. If what the student wrote resembled the “jagged edge” pattern, a teacher might encourage the student to stick more closely to the main point. If the teacher recognizes this “jagged” tendency in writing, it should be recognized as something of value that is learned at home. However, it is also very important for the teacher to explicitly teach the English writing style, which is very direct and “to the point.” In other words, the teacher is acknowledging the native pattern but is teaching the style of writing, more direct and to the point in nature, that will be tested on standardized exams. A culturally responsive teacher may allow students to write in their natural manner with informal writings such as journals or learning logs; however, students should be taught to write in the direct mode for purposes of standardized testing. This approach validates the language patterns many Latino students bring to school, while also explicitly teaching the style of writing that will allow them to be successful when tested (García, 2002).

What are the educational implications for knowing the above information about language? Knowing nuances of language and communication can have a dramatic effect on how the teacher instructs in the classroom, the activities and strategies used in language arts, and how to communicate effectively with parents. In other words, if the teacher knows students are not afforded much time to discuss school activities or express themselves fully

at home, then adequate time slots should be devoted during class to develop a repertoire of rich oral language experiences, which will later transfer to reading and writing exercises. For example, as a classroom teacher, I would devote some time on Monday mornings for students to talk about what they did on the weekend. I wasn't being "nosey," but I understood this was time well spent because it provided students with an opportunity to reflect on their activities and to express themselves orally in complete sentences. Due to various factors, in many of my students' homes, large amounts of times were usually not devoted for lengthy conversations with children. Therefore, it was important for me to use classroom time to help develop oral language skills. It also provided a platform for discussions, questions, sharing, and getting to know each other better (Hill & Flynn, 2006). This time was also used for practicing English speaking skills on subsequent days.

Diversity in cultural experiences

The levels of educational attainment of Latino parents impact their educational experiences, expectations for their children, their involvement and participation in their children's school activities and projects, and many other areas. At times, educators have had the misconception that Latino parents do not want to become involved in their children's education because they do not participate or volunteer at school. However, once again nothing could be further from the truth. Many Latino parents indicate they do not "participate" for varying reasons. First of all, one or both parents may work two jobs to keep the family afloat financially, and there is not much time to devote to school activities or volunteering opportunities. Other reasons include inconvenient times to volunteer, lack of transportation to school, inability to speak English, or not feeling welcomed when visiting schools

(Robles-Goodwin, 2004). Latino parents also have many different perceptions of the school's role, and the role of the parents. Many Latino parents who may not have had much formal education could feel they cannot help out in schools because they themselves do not have the educational skills for assisting in the classroom. Others feel like they are "involved parents" because they get their children up, feed and dress them, and transport them to school. They feel they have completed "their duty." Now the teachers should do "their part," which is to teach. Latino parents may not understand why teachers ask them to become involved. Many view this plea as a sign that the teacher is "lazy" or not "well prepared" (Moreno & Valencia, 2002). What is certain is that a misunderstanding may occur on both sides regarding what is truly meant by schools and teachers reaching out to the community and parents in an effort to work together. The question is how can both teachers and parents better understand each other's perspectives?

Bridging the information gap

Two experienced Spanish bilingual teachers are called to the principal's office to address complaints from a group of Spanish-speaking parents with children in the bilingual program. The parents are concerned about the quality of educational experiences (or lack of them) in the area of literacy and question the preparedness of the two teachers.

In another situation two bilingual kindergarten teachers are at a loss as to why the parents view them as mediocre teachers when they both work hard to provide a teaching approach and philosophy that is developmentally, culturally, and educationally appropriate for their Latino students. All activities are completed with much planning and knowledge of current educational best practices for enhancing the literacy skills of ELLs, particularly

Latino students. Furthermore, both bilingual teachers are fluent in Spanish. One is a native speaker, and the other learned Spanish by taking courses in high school and college.

After discussing the situation further with the principal, it is discovered the parents feel the students are not receiving enough worksheets to practice letter formation. Both teachers know they have been utilizing a variety of hands-on activities to enhance many of the literacy skills needed at the kindergarten level. Many emergent skills such as recognizing individual names of the alphabet letters are taught through literature. For example, they have been used to introduce different types of literary genres to the students as they have read and discussed each book, written story charts, made class books, written language experience stories, made Venn diagrams of two or more books to discuss similarities and differences, and conducted many other hands-on activities. The parents are correct: the teachers do not use worksheets in their teaching. If you ask the teachers why, they will state that the worksheets are not age or educationally appropriate to use with these young students. They believe there are other suitable ways to meet the same objectives without resorting to using worksheets. During lessons, the students are asked to think about the story and the main character(s). Teachers supply crayons and paper and ask the students to draw a different ending to the story or to imagine that they are the main character and to think of what they might have done differently than the decision made by the main character in the book. Since the kindergarten students have varying writing skills and experiences, the students are instructed to illustrate the story. Afterwards, the students dictate their stories to the teacher. The teacher then writes their stories. The drawings from each student are put together to create a class book for the students to "read." These books are chosen and "read" over and over by the

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students because they had a part in putting it together, and it has relevance to their lives.

In this instance, the two teachers could have easily become angry with the parents' concerns. Why didn't the parents just address their concerns with them? Why did they feel the need to talk to the principal, who didn't even speak Spanish? Needless to say, it was an awkward situation. Both teachers thought long and hard about how they would handle this situation for them. After much deliberation, it was concluded that a "talk" with the parents to address their concerns would not be effective. It could even become counterproductive or even combative. After all, they both knew that they were well-trained and utilizing current best teaching practices when working with Latino students.

The two teachers decided to invite the parents to come to school one evening for an hour so they could experience a daily literacy lesson their children completed that day. When the parents arrived, the teachers separated the parents into two groups, one half going with Teacher A and the other half with Teacher B. The parents working with Teacher A experienced reading of a story, discussion of characters, plot, and problem resolution, and exploration of their favorite character. Their responses were written by Teacher A on a large tablet and later read out loud. The concluding activity included giving each parent a piece of Manila paper and crayons for illustrating a different story ending of their own.

The group working with Teacher B experienced reading of a story, discussion, and a worksheet in which each parent had to write the letter "l" over and over again on a lined worksheet. The story was about a "lobo" (wolf), so the worksheet had a picture of a wolf on the center top half of the worksheet. The lower part had lines for the student to write the letter "l" over and over again. The

parents in both groups assumed the role of students. For the last part of the meeting, both groups of parents were brought together for a debriefing of their experiences as students. They were asked to recall their experiences and to state what they had learned. While the parents shared, the teachers wrote their responses on the tablet. The parents with Teacher A commented on all the activities they had done. They also recalled having to “think” very much. They had to think about the story, their favorite part, and another ending. They commented on how it was fun and exciting but very hard work. After all statements were written on the tablet, the parents realized the word “think” came up over and over again. One parent stated that she thought so much it made her head hurt. Another parent commented on the fact that it was hard work to think on a “high level” before actually drawing his picture. Although the parents only saw the finished “art project” when their children brought home their school work, they now realized there indeed had been some in-depth thought and higher-level thinking prior to the drawings.

The parents with Teacher B began to share their experiences. To sum up their responses, most of them listened to a story, discussed it, and then finished the worksheet with the wolf picture. They talked about how they just wrote the letter “l” (for “lobo”) over and over again. One mother stated she got bored writing the letter “l” again and again. When asked what she learned, she said, “Nothing. While I was writing all those letters, I kept thinking about other things. I thought about what I needed to do after I got home from this meeting, like going to the grocery store or washing a load of laundry, . . .”

All of a sudden, one seemingly reticent father stood up and said, “Now I get it! I was one of the parents who complained to the principal about your teaching. I realize now that I was judging

your competence and your teaching strategies based on the lack of worksheets. All I ever saw coming home were pictures with dictations. My thoughts were, 'I'm sending my children to school so they can play and draw pictures all day.' Now I understand!" He also recognized, as well as other parents, they were reverting back to the way in which they had been taught when in kindergarten. Many of them had been educated in different parts of Latin America. Their educational system had been very traditional with the reliance of a multitude of worksheets. Their teachers usually had up to 35 students at one time, so worksheets were common and probably helped the teacher regain a little time for grouping or transition activities. So, through this literacy reenactment with hands-on activities experienced in the classroom on a daily basis, the parents soon realized how much their children were learning while they were in school. They also expressed appreciation to the teachers for their hard work and understanding. They vowed to assist their children in any way necessary to help them continue learning. Ladson-Billings (1995) and Delpit (1995) reported that when the curriculum was connected to their backgrounds, the students were able to understand complex ideas even beyond their reading levels. Conversely, a continuous disconnect between the children's background may cause them to become disengaged with literacy activities (Ferdman, 1990).

While this story has a happy ending, the teachers learned much from this experience. They learned that although they were doing many good things in the classroom, they needed to do a better job of communicating with the parents about their goals, expectations, and strategies. In other words, they needed to find methods of communicating class projects, themes, fieldtrips, and other newsworthy information to parents. They decided to have a weekly newsletter titled "Esta Semana" (This Week). In this

newsletter, the teachers briefly recaptured all the major events and learning for the week such as stories, poems, activities, upcoming events, requests, reminders, and special student commendations. This one-page newsletter was sent home with the students every Friday afternoon. As the year progressed, the teachers allowed the students more input on what would be depicted in the newsletter. The teacher also allowed students with artistic abilities to illustrate some events or even create some type of "clip art." The bottom line of the newsletters always ended with positive statements such as: "¡La escuela esta semana fue maravillosa!" (School this week was marvelous!). The compilation of the newsletter afforded the teachers' an opportunity to recapture not only the daily activities, but also the week's learning.

In addition, teachers recognized the need to provide closure at the end of each day to allow the students to reflect on their learning. Therefore, during the last 10-15 minutes of each day, the teachers would ask the students, "What did you learn today?" The students' responses were written on a large tablet. So when the students' parents asked, "What did you learn today?", the students were ready to answer the question.

On the other hand, teachers not utilizing a weekly newsletter or closure to the day's learning before dismissal time later learned from parents that their children would always state they did not learn anything in school that day—even if that was not true. The problem was that the students simply were not given opportunities at school to reflect on learning and then discuss in advance.

After a while, the parents became accustomed to receiving the weekly newsletters. If a teacher was ill or was out for one reason or another and could not get the weekly newsletter out on Friday, the parents would call the school to report their Weekly Newsletter was missing. It became a great communication vehicle for this

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school and the teachers. The parents became "connected" to the teachers and the learning that was taking place at school (Moreno & Valencia, 2002).

In yet another instance, a mother of twin boys expresses concern because her sons were placed in two separate kindergarten classrooms. One son comes home every day enthusiastically talking about new stories, poems, and songs learned during the day, while the other one states he learned nothing.

In this scenario, the mother of the twin sons has concerns. One of her sons was in a class in which the teacher utilized a weekly newsletter, and the other was in a class in which the teacher did not. The mother expressed she could definitely tell the difference between her sons' educational experiences. One son always came home telling about a new story, song or poem, while the other did not. He enjoyed going to school, while the other one did not. One son appeared to be learning and progressing, while the other son appeared to just be "filling in the time." As for the mother's perception of the two teachers, she believed one to be exceptional, and the other mediocre.

The teachers using the weekly newsletters became the favorites for parents. These teachers recognized the importance of communicating with parents in a systematic way. Word got out that these teachers were the best in every way. Why? Why this sudden turn around in perceptions and attitudes about the teachers? What made the difference? These teachers were considered exceptional in their districts. One held a masters degree and the other a doctorate, but both had been misunderstood by their Latino parents. The teachers had not understood the importance of communicating and connecting with the Latino parents in their community. The weekly newsletter gave them one outlet needed for consistent communications. Other outreaches utilized

throughout the year were conferences with parent and occasional home visits. Parents can support schools only if they are kept abreast of the changes occurring in school practices and instruction. Parents who are poorly informed cannot participate fully in schools (King & Goodwin, 2002; Moreno & Valencia, 2002).

Tapping into strategies that work

Traditional ways of reaching out to Latino parents have not been traditionally culturally responsive. Schools today should aim for being creative in their outreach attempts to improve communications with Latino parents. Many times, it will take an “out of the box” plan to accomplish this mission (Moreno & Valencia, 2002). These endeavors can be accomplished through informal conversations with them, home visits, parent conferences, surveys or whatever other methods work for a particular school. One creative school recognized Latino parents were not able to attend school meetings and assemblies for parents in the evening, so the school began offering a session in Spanish at the party room of the apartment complex that most of their students lived. This outreach had never been attempted, but it appeared to be effective in reaching out to a large number of parents not able to come to the school.

Home visits

Another way to learn more about how families communicate with each other is to observe them. Many cultural facets can be viewed first hand by visiting the homes of families. For example during home visits, it is interesting to note interactions between adults and children—to observe the many verbal and nonverbal

ways they communicate with each other. Many times, silence can symbolize respect, especially toward older relatives. Do children listen to or interact with adults? What is the role of the child? Do the adults expand on children's leads in conversations? Many children are not allowed to interrupt an adult's conversation, while other families encourage all to participate in conversations and storytelling.

Because of the changing times, attitudes, misunderstandings, lack of time, and many other reasons, home visits do not seem to be as common as they used to be. As a professor, I advocate for this practice but many of my pre-service teachers tend to fixate on the dangerous reasons why it should not be done today instead of focusing on the benefits. As a teacher, my principals recognized the value of connecting with Latino parents in a very unique way only accomplished through home visits, especially visiting families that were unable to come to school. The principals allowed teachers to visit and become familiar with the school's community since most teachers did not live in the same community. The benefits were invaluable for both me and my families. I was treated like royalty, and most importantly, my students felt the same because their teacher had visited their home. These visits, allowed me and the parents to get to know each other in an informal and comfortable setting. I was able to meet fathers I had not met due to their work schedules, see extended family members, meet pets, discover the interests of the family, see hobbies, see the home environment, and see the surrounding community. It also was a time to learn about the parents' perspectives, concerns, goals, and aspirations as they related to their children. In my interviews with hundreds of parents, I never interviewed a single parent that did not have high goals and educational aspirations for their children. They always wanted their children to "have more

than they had—more education, more opportunities.” The only barrier to meeting these goals was they didn’t seem to have a plan or the facility for accessing resources. For example, they wanted their children to attend college; however, many of them did not have a financial plan to pay for it and were unable to relate to the college experience (Robles-Goodwin, 2004). Home visits are golden moments for caring teachers to intervene and provide guidance to parents in these areas. After my home visits, I had a greater understanding of my students’ home environments and a better understanding of what was relevant or meaningful to them. The information learned was then translated to the school environment.

For instance, on one of my home visits, I arrived to find my student outside his apartment looking for bugs. He was fascinated by all types of bugs. One day, he arrived early at school with his hands behind him. He asked me to close my eyes and extend my hands out because he had a big surprise for me. Because students usually brought me apples, weeds (or wild flowers), and other things, I complied. To my disbelief, I felt something “buggy” crawling up my arm. I screamed and opened my eyes. My student looked at me and said, “Isn’t he beautiful?” I realized he had given me something that was very precious to him. After breathing again, I incorporated a “bug” theme in my science center. He especially enjoyed the addition of silkworms in the spring.

Teachers conducting home visits tend to better understand the personal home situations that may impact the learning experience at school. The habit of a student falling asleep during class is now understood because it was observed that the student shared a room with two teenage brothers that may have work schedules that conflict with school bedtimes (Robles-Goodwin, 2006).

During home visits to Latino homes, teachers from a successful school reported seeing many types of exotic birds or parrots as pets (Robles-Goodwin, Mohr, & Wilhelm, 2005; Wilhelm, Robles-Goodwin, & Mohr, 2005). With this knowledge, some teachers decided to incorporate a unit on birds into their integrated curriculum. During language arts, they read books on birds, wrote stories about birds; and in art, they made paper maché birds. All content areas addressed were taught by incorporating the bird theme. Student interest in this theme was high because it was one they could relate to. The teachers went a step farther in their responsive approach by inviting parents to bring their birds to school to share their "expert" knowledge on caring for these pets. This school recognized a successful way to connect to the Latino parents and to infuse the specific knowledge learned during home visits into their teaching. With this successful experience, the school had extended the "welcome mat" and the parents were now visiting on a frequent basis. In fact, another class invited several mothers to come and share the cultural tradition of making tamales during the winter holidays (Robles-Goodwin, et al., 2005; Wilhelm, et al., 2005).

Parent conferences

Parent conferences should be planned deliberately with very specific goals. Something that I found very helpful during parent conferences was to ask parents to relay any particular information that I needed to know about the student that would help me as the classroom teacher. This information could range from learning challenges or disabilities, illnesses, or any family traditions or childrearing practices, customs, etc. For example, many Latino parents instruct their children to look down when they are being disciplined. Although this practice varies from family to family,

this behavior is seen as a sign of respect toward the authority figure in the family. It seems that more recent arrivals to this country are more apt to adhere to this tradition of respect to elders than first or second generation Latino students. This custom, however, has the opposite effect in U.S. schools, where many American teachers see the lowering of the eyes as a sign of disrespect toward them (Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hines, 2000).

During parent conferences or informal occasions with the teacher, Latino parents always seem to ask teachers, “¿Cómo se comporta mi hijo?” (How does my child behave at school?) A child’s behavior is very important to many Latino parents. They always admonish their children to behave well at school. For many Latino parents, a sign of an educated person is one that behaves appropriately, especially at school. Some Latino students know they may be punished twice for misbehaving—once at school and again at home (Hildebrand et al., 2000). As a teacher, I worked with another teacher who stated how much trouble a certain student was giving her in terms of behavior. She stated how she had tried different types of approaches, but none of them seemed to make a difference. She identified the student. I was surprised to learn of his behavior, especially since I knew the student and the family very well. This family was hard-working in which the father held down two jobs to support the family. I asked the teacher if I could talk to this student. She gladly accepted my offer since none of her strategies had worked. When I walked into the classroom and approached this student, I expressed how disappointed I was to hear of his behavior. I also commented on how sad his father would feel when notified of his behavior, especially since he worked so hard to make sure his children attended school. He quickly looked up with much remorse for his conduct and asked me not to contact his father. The news of his

behavior would indeed make his father very sad, and he did not want to disappoint him. He promised to "change his ways" immediately. I informed the teacher about the student's effort to follow the rules in a respectful manner. A couple of days later, the teacher asked me what I had done because the student's behavior had changed completely. The solution wasn't magical. What the teacher didn't realize is that I understood something about how important respect is in a Latino family, especially when it comes to the parents. The good or bad behavior of students in schools usually reflects upon their parents. La Roche and Shriberg (2004) define "respeto" (respect) as a cultural value that centers on obedience toward parents and elders. Many Latino children are taught to comply with authority figures. Specific knowledge of the culture helped with the manner in which the student was "disciplined" (Hildebrand et al. 2000; Lynch et al., 2004).

Parent conferences are also very useful for helping Latino parents understand the programs and services their children may be receiving at school. For example, many Latino parents I interviewed did not know if their children were receiving bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) services at school, even though parental permission is required in order for students to be placed in these programs (Robles-Goodwin, 2004). Furthermore, many Latino parents with limited English skills and children, who also had similar language levels, rejected bilingual/ESL services for them. When questioned about their decisions, many reported they did not want their children in remedial classrooms. It was apparent that these parents were misinformed about the goals and purposes of placing qualified students in the bilingual program. Schools need to have some type of an informational session to inform Latino parents about the educational services available to their children. These services, if done well, can certainly

accelerate English proficiency and learning. However, if parents reject the services, many Latino students are placed in English-only classrooms without any special language assistance to learn English. While some students survive without the help, others simply fall behind academically each year. Through parent conferences, misconceptions about the bilingual program can be discussed and clarified.

Recommendations for reaching goals

Educators generally agree that effective teaching requires mastery of content knowledge, including pedagogical skills. However, too many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach ethnically diverse students. Many teacher education programs still debate the best way of incorporating multicultural education in their courses, despite the increasing percentage of minority students performing poorly that will be encountered when pre-service teachers enter the classroom (Garcia, 2002; Hildebrand et al., 2000; Nieto, 2004). Explicit knowledge about the cultural diversity of many groups, including in-group differences, is imperative to meeting the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students. Much of the current research on working with Latinos is not comprehensive in addressing the variables that make them a diverse group (Garcia, 2002; Hildebrand et al., 2000; Nieto, 2004). For example, the culture of recent arrivals to the U.S. varies greatly as compared to first or second generation Latinos. The information available about the Latinos has the tendency of portraying all Latinos as recent immigrants. Latinos vary culturally when considering how long they have been in the U.S., including the types of challenges they will experience in schools. In fact, much more research needs to be conducted on biracial

families with Latino heritage in terms of cultural identities and the impact on teaching these students (Moreno et al., 2002). There is no "one approach fits all" when working with Latino students and their families. It has been the author's experience in interviewing Latino parents in Spanish that there is not enough research being conducted that actually involves talking to Spanish-speaking parents, especially those who do not speak any English, in an effort to get their feelings, impressions, and perceptions regarding educational issues (Robles-Goodwin, 2004; Robles-Goodwin, 2006). The following recommendations are offered in an effort to assist teachers in gaining a better understanding of the cultural variability of Latino students.

- Incorporate into teacher education programs curricula that address the diversity of Latino students and their families such as folklore, celebrations, traditions, and beliefs. The impact of intra-group diversity on teaching and learning should be emphasized when preparing future teachers for diverse classrooms.
- Demonstrate commitment to meaningful and culturally responsive home-school collaborations by creating a mission statement and setting yearly goals (King & Goodwin, 2002). This task should be done collectively as a school to include a variety of personnel such office staff, teachers, campus administrators, and parent representatives, especially for "buy-in" purposes.
- Strong parental involvement in a child's education is essential to the success of the child and school. Schools with large Latino numbers should develop creative and comprehensive ways to ensure that parents are connected to the school's culture, purpose, and organization.

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- Plan a series of parent-focus groups, parent-teacher seminars or parent-teacher team-building activities based on survey/interview findings.
- Improve communications with Latino parents by asking for their input in creative ways and keeping them informed. These endeavors can be accomplished through informal conversations with them, classroom newsletters, home visits, parent conferences, surveys or whatever other methods work in a particular community.
- Create a cultural resource binder for keeping valuable information such as personnel resources, translators, community organizations, and free health clinics. This binder can become a resource to teachers, families, and visitors.
- Designate a space or room for parents. This resource space for families should be inviting. It should be a place for accessing resources, reading, and meeting with other parents or just getting a cup of coffee. A formalized space sends a strong welcoming message to families.
- Utilize Latino teachers as resources for the school to accomplish outreach initiatives. However, it should not be assumed that a Latino teacher will be familiar with all the cultural variability encountered among Latino families.
- Recognize that Latinos are culturally and linguistically diverse, and their length of time in the U.S. impacts their acculturation into American schools. For example, not all Latinos are recent arrivals to this country. Many are now first or second generation Latinos.
- Incorporate elements and themes of the Latino culture into the school curriculum and integrate it throughout all subject areas. For example, a teacher can use examples students

can relate to when writing a story for language arts or when the teacher gives a story problem for solving a math problem.

Conclusion

A culturally responsive teaching approach attempts to increase the academic achievement of students by making learning more relevant and meaningful to their experiences and frames of references. Neuman (1999) posits that culturally responsive instruction focuses on recognizing and valuing children's home cultures, promoting collaboration, holding high standards for all children, and appreciating the continuity between children's home life and their school literacy experiences. Traditionally, the goals and structure of public schools in the U.S. has not reflected values conducive to success of Latino students. Demographics for Latinos in U.S. schools require innovative approaches and outreaches for better understanding and working with Latino families in today's schools.

This article has suggested ways teachers and schools can reach out to Latino families in a variety of ways in order to understand more about their diverse culture. A one-size-fits-all approach to working with Latino families should not be used. An individualized framework accommodating for cultural variability of Latinos should be recognized and used when considering curricular decisions. The knowledge gained should be used to provide a more culturally responsive curriculum and approach that recognizes meaningful and reciprocal connections between school and home settings.

Through thoughtful and deliberate school efforts to better understand the diversity of Latino families in U.S. schools,

educators can begin to plan for specific strategies to encourage mutual collaboration between school and home. This type of initiative can greatly enhance the educational achievement of Latino students as well as provide a nurturing environment for teaching and learning.

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