

Supporting Positive Home-School Connections with Ethnic Minority Parents

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Many educators believe that strengthening family involvement in schools is one of the most important ways to improve student school success (Aronzon, 1996; Ballen & Moles, 1994; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Often, teachers view parental non-involvement as a lack of interest in their children's achievement. Conversely, some ethnic minority parents do not feel comfortable attending school events. Therefore, understanding the ways schools either support and sustain or limit and suspend home-school connections can help more children achieve. This article begins by describing connection between family involvement and student achievement. We examine possible perceptual differences present in existing home-school participation structures, and conclude with suggestions to enhance home-school interactions for Mexican American parents.

Family-school connections

Research shows that the strongest association between parental involvement and student achievement is enjoyed by European American middle-class parents and their children;

however, it also reports that ethnic minority parental involvement has a positive effect on the academic achievement of their children (Jeynes, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Some studies examine the degree and type of participation experienced by ethnic minority parents (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991). This body of work describes the extent to which families feel welcomed in school, and reveals differences in home-school perception (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991; Vandegrift & Greene, 1992; Whitehead, 1993). Additionally, Epstein (1995) points out that most schools use six types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Each type, generic in nature, has a purpose. All have a different impact on home-school linkages. All place some degree of restriction on the opportunities for diverse parents to participate in school events.

Perceptual differences in participation structures

A problem emerges when schools, perhaps inadvertently, do not take into account differences among the economic, linguistic, and cultural values, skills, and experiences of the children and parents involved (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2005; Sheets, 2005). For example, past research shows that many communication strategies directed at ethnic minority and low-income families tend to (a) alert parents of misbehavior and low academic achievement, or (b) focus on negative school perceptions of the home, such as poor parenting skills, degrees of English proficiency, or (c) include directives related to the perceived limitations in the experiences, skills, and knowledge of parents and children (Villegas, 1991). Consequently, repeated written and oral messages from schools to Mexican American parents tell them to speak in English to their children or to help them with homework. Both of these messages

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can be perceived as insensitive to parenting skills, values and needs of this ethnic minority group. Parents are generally proud of their children's developing bilingualism. Most believe that their home language benefits their children. They view Spanish as a cultural tool necessary to the maintenance of strong cultural familial connections. Thus, being asked to stop speaking their heritage language by teachers whom they respect can generate discomfort and conflict. Their frustration in helping with homework and a cultural belief that they should not interfere with the ways school teach can generate frustration and feelings of inadequacy. Parents who do not help their children with homework may cause some teachers to view families as lazy, apathetic, or uncaring about their child's learning. Contrasting sentiments on both parts serve to distance rather than encourage positive child-school-parent relationships.

Thus, schools and teachers can unwittingly disenfranchise parents by providing letters, memos, newsletters, or other traditional contact methods and requirements, such as uninvited home visits, mandatory parent-teacher conferences, imposed parental workshops, use of material enticements, or weekly discipline or work folders requiring parental signatures. These forms of communication on the surface may seem appropriate, but could actually cause undue stress in the home. Some parents may not be able to take a day off from work to attend parent-teacher conferences if they are held only during regular work hours. Families may feel embarrassed of their economic status and their less than perfect living conditions. Workshops in English for Spanish-speaking parents may seem irrelevant regardless of the content, or weekly discipline folders requiring a parent's signature may be signed without parents understanding the purpose of this practice. Some districts use material incentives to entice parents

and promote involvement. These may include invitations to a district's clothes closet or handing out vouchers for the local grocery stores. While most parents will not inform the school of their discomfort, some may not want to be viewed as charity cases, or they may choose to keep private their use of second-hand clothing for their child.

The home-school connection

Schools which understand the cultural values and needs of diverse parents can translate this knowledge base to culturally responsive home-school activities (Gay, 2000). Some culturally inclusive interventions that successfully bridge home and school can include (a) providing qualified interpreters or community-selected liaisons for scheduled home visits and parent-teacher conferences, (b) validating parent volunteers with access and space within the entire campus, (c) translating written messages, and (d) inviting families to school functions such as awards assemblies, math competitions, plays, musicals, debates, spelling bees, chess games, and sport activities. However, assumptions cannot be made that ethnic minority parents who regularly attend school functions are automatically involved in leadership roles or in decision-making positions. Sometimes, involved parents will feel embarrassed if their low level of education limits their participation, especially if schools are reluctant to involve them in meaningful roles and perceive them more as a problem rather than a helper (Sheets, 2005).

In addition, family involvement in the school setting can effectively address specific academic and social needs of ethnic minority parents. Standardized home-school participation policies and practices can be adapted or changed. Schools' participatory

structures can take into consideration the parents' needs for alternative meeting times and places. The nature of their home routines, literacy practices, and cultural values can be incorporated into home-school participation designs. This suggests that schools, willing to serve parental needs, must be ready to accommodate in ways that (a) encourage higher levels of acceptance of cultural differences, (b) build a knowledge base to promote cultural and linguistic understandings, (c) develop respectful levels of trust, and (d) promote strategies to strengthen and sustain equitable relationships.

Involvement of Mexican American families

While various models of parental involvement have been proposed, some do not examine and scrutinize how diverse cultural and linguistic variations dictate the extent to which parents can participate in school life. To improve the quality and quantity of participation of Mexican American parents, we propose attention should be given to the following:

Culturally safe atmosphere

- Establish a positive and friendly tone in all interactions through informal conversation, and when possible, provide light refreshments.
- Provide opportunities for teachers and parents to meet informally prior to scheduling formal meetings or required conferences. These steps could enhance teacher-parent communications and minimize feelings of discomfort and alienation.

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- Become aware of differences between the requirements of the U. S. public system and school expectations in their heritage country.

Example: In the Mexican American culture it is polite to inquire about the family members or to ask if you can be of assistance prior to beginning the actual task at hand. You might offer the parents a cup of coffee, give them time to become comfortable with their surroundings, and inquire about their family before giving information regarding their child's progress.

Cultural parameters

- Seek understanding of parents' prior home-school experiences and the extent of their involvement in previous school settings, especially if this was carried out in another cultural or national setting. This knowledge base can provide greater awareness for school personnel in this country.

- Include parent-teacher discussions regarding areas where cultural differences might occur.

- Offer professional development for teachers to enhance their awareness of how views held by school may potentially conflict with the values modeled in the child's home.

- Identify and process possible cultural barriers.

Example: Differences between appropriate personal space and acceptable speaking tone and volume can affect communication. Speaking distance varies among cultures. Speech considered loud in some cultures may be perceived as normal in others. In the Mexican

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American culture, the teacher is viewed as an authority figure; thus, summoning parents for a conference can be interpreted as scolding in nature. Therefore, it is important for teachers to use a professional, soft, and pleasant voice to diffuse the possibly negative connotation of the meeting.

Shared roles

- Provide an open and welcoming place where discussions include how parents see their roles as parents and how they view the role of the teacher as part of their child's life at school.
- Include conversations that provide opportunities for the parents to state their expectations for schooling as it pertains to their children within the U.S. public school system, as they understand it.
- Be aware that some parents may choose to discuss the reasons for their leaving a home country and the conditions leading to this decision.

Cultural brokers

- Identify individuals who can serve the cultural community as advocates for families. These advocates generally understand how their neighborhoods work, and may serve as valuable liaisons between the school and the community.
- Assist the parents in selecting leaders from within their own communities. Individuals chosen should be those preferred by parents themselves as they are usually active within their cultural circles of influence and are generally seen as leaders.

Conclusions

Creating a supportive learning environment requires an understanding of cultural, social, and linguistic factors that reach beyond the classroom into the homes of children. With respect to home-school relationships, teachers should be cognizant of the ways in which meaningful communication may be affected by language differences and cultural values. Awareness of parents' perceptions of schooling and the expectations they have for their children can enhance, build, and develop home-school bonds. Knowledge of home routines and belief systems is critical to promote effective parent involvement. Schools can be a welcoming place for all parents. Since data show persistent underachievement for children identified as English language learners, it is especially critical that home-school-community connections for this group become a priority.

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