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ABSTRACT

This study used interviews, home visits, observations of parent meetings, and informal discussions to examine parental involvement at a Texas elementary school with a high concentration of Mexican American families. In 1997-98, the school's Parent Involvement Cadre (1995-1997) was replaced with a new system of subject-related and support committees involving only teachers. Five parents were included on the Campus Advisory Council (CAC), which addressed decisions about planning, budgeting, curriculum, staffing patterns, staff development, and school organization. The school was to use the CAC to involve parents in the goal-setting process and other decisions. Guidelines for selecting the parent representatives for 2-year terms and their duties are explained in this paper. Due to local interpretation of district directives and state requirements, both staff and parents were confused about what their duties were, the extent of parental involvement in the decision-making process, and how parents were to be informed. The fact that the principal had the final say on all decisions and was held accountable for the operation of the school posed another problem, in that parents felt their input was not a part of the decision making-process. Issues that affected decision making were professionalism, lack of information, and reliance on social networks to distribute information. Recommendations include clarification of the site-based decision-making guidelines; involvement of new parents; use of democratic principles; better communication with all parents; a longer term of service for CAC parent representatives; an assessment of parental needs; and a hierarchical inclusion of all parents at various levels. (Contains 13 references.) (SAS)

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Mexican American Parental Involvement in Site Based Management

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1

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 13-17, 1998, San Diego, CA

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Successful education of minority students is the prerequisite to their social advancement, and parental involvement is one of the key components of that success (Chavkin, 1989). While parental involvement in the education of their children is the focus of much research, little of this exploration has described minority and/or low socioeconomic parents. Instead, the research has commonly centered on the involvement of white, middle class parents. As a result, stereotypic responses, such as “minority parents do not want or should not be involved” remain among educators (Lightfoot, 1978; Moles, 1993; Ritter, Mont-Reynaud & Dornbusch, 1993). Often some teachers believe Mexican American parents are not interested or not educated enough to be of assistance (Epstein, 1990; Moles, 1993; Rich, 1993). Some teachers and principals have stereotyped minority parents as uncooperative, unconcerned and uncaring about their children's education (Lightfoot, 1978).

While some teachers have welcomed parent participation and used it effectively to motivate students, other teachers have not felt secure enough to have parents in their classroom. In turn, Mexican American parents have encountered personal, cultural and/or structural barriers that kept them from actively participating in their child's education (Bauch, 1993; Chavkin, 1989; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993; Moles, 1993; Scott-Jones, 1993). With these issues in mind, the main purpose of this study has been to explore and describe the involvement or lack of involvement of Mexican American parents in their children's education. Parental involvement may take a variety of forms both in and out of school yet few researchers have studied parents on advisory boards (Moles, 1993). Therefore, one area of focus is to explore Mexican American parental involvement in site based management.

Design of the Study

This year long study examined parental involvement at one elementary school with a high concentration of Mexican American families. In this case study, the concept of parental involvement was studied within the school context, but participants were free to define parental involvement in their own terms and by their own actions. The main question directing the study was how Mexican American parents were or were not involved and how they translated their involvement into decisions regarding their children's education.

My study explored and described parental involvement at Parker Elementary School, located in a large urban city in Texas. During the 1997-98 school year in which this study was conducted, Parker Elementary enrolled 618 students. Student ethnicity included four Native Americans (.65%), two Asians (.32%), 25 African Americans

(4.05%), 560 Hispanics (90.61%), and 27 White (4.37%) students. Of these 618 students, 553 (89.48%) were identified as economically disadvantaged.

The choice of selecting cooperating teachers whose classrooms I would study was directed by the principal. With the request of a representative sample of both English and Spanish speaking parents and two different grade levels, the principal selected two prekindergarten/kindergarten and two third/fourth grade classrooms. At the beginning of September, I distributed copies of the introductory letter/consent form to all four teachers to pass out to all classroom parents. Forty-three of seventy-five letters were returned, resulting in a 57% return rate. Of these, 30 letters indicated acceptance to participating in the study, a 40% participation rate. Interviews with 28 classroom parents were conducted at their convenience. Two parents were not available despite several attempts to reach them and were therefore dropped from the study. The participating parents included 37.5% (12 of 32) of the prekindergarten/ kindergarten parents, five prekindergarten and seven kindergarten parents. Of these twelve parents, three represented single parent homes and nine students had both parents living in the home. Seven parents were predominantly Spanish speaking and five English speaking. Two parents were not living within the school area, two parents were new to the area, and eight parents had lived two years or more within the school community. The third/fourth grade parents included 42.1% (16 of 38), eight from each grade level. Five parents were single parents and eleven families had both parents living at home. While one parent was bilingual, ten were predominantly English speaking and five Spanish speaking only. Participating parents included twelve who had been living in the area two or more years and four were no longer in the area. Upon approval of the participants, the research involved home visits, observations of parent meetings, informal discussions, and formal interviews. Interviews were conducted with the administrators, the parent representatives on the Campus Advisory Council and Playground Committee, PTO officers, and with the prekindergarten/kindergarten and third/fourth grade teachers. Additional interviews with community representatives, the school counselor and two other teachers were conducted to provide a historical context to the study. Participation was voluntary and informants were protected with anonymity. Data for this study were collected through direct observations of PTO, Playground Committee, parent conferences and Open House meetings, participant observations of Campus Advisory Council meetings, open-ended interviews with parents, and the examination of appropriate school documentation regarding parent involvement.

Parental Involvement in Decision Making

One of the first opportunities for parents to be involved in decision making roles occurred in the spring of 1995 when parents were also asked to participate in the school's parental involvement cadre (team). Ms. Freedman, a teacher at Parker for 18 years recalled:

When we formed cadres here at Parker and that would have been about three or four years ago, I was on the Parent Involvement Cadre because that to me seemed like such a critical point in any school or institution to have that connection and have a systematic way of communicating with parents and have the parents communicate with us.

However, one parent participant in the study who was also involved in the cadre felt that parents were not actually included in the cadre despite the good intentions. Mrs. Gamez, who was invited to participate in the cadre by the Parent Training Specialist, stated:

Fue dos veces, tres veces fue y no. La primera vez nos dejaron participar bastante pero despues de esa ya no. Me estuvo como no les gusto y pues por eso nos dejaron participar menos. Piense que nomas entonces quieran que una estuvira para estar escuchando nada mas, como una representacion. (I went two times, three times and no. The first time they let us participate a lot, but after that no. I felt like they did not like it and that is why they let us participate less. I thought they simply wanted us to be there listening but nothing else, like a representative).

In 1997-98, the cadre system was replaced with committees on school climate, math/science, literacy, cultural, LPAC, technology, and gifted/talented. Teachers in each grade level team were assigned to committees based on their preferences. The assignment process considered sufficient representation of teachers on each committee. Teachers on the Campus Advisory Council were not assigned to any committees since meetings were held on the last Thursday of the month when the council met. The school did not plan a separate parental involvement committee, because the principal felt that in the past with a separate cadre teachers thought parental involvement was another group's concern. By including parental involvement in the Campus Improvement Plan, the principal hoped that the teachers would work on this goal throughout the year. When the school was organized by the cadre system, parents were invited to sit in and participate in the cadre meetings. Under the new system of committees, only the staff was involved in the committees. The only committee to include parents was the Campus Advisory Council which involved the five parent representatives in advising and making recommendations about school decisions. The role of parents in decision making appeared to have undergone changes when the district restructured the decision making process and therefore, a description of the Campus Advisory Council will provide further understanding of parental involvement in this area.

Shift to Campus Advisory Councils

On November 28, 1995, Austin Independent School District announced "the beginning of a new campus-level, decision-making process" which "under the leadership of the Campus Advisory Council (CAC), [would] engage more parents and community members in decisions of student learning" (AISD, 1995). Council representatives were to reflect the campus or community at-large and were to replace the Campus Leadership Teams (CLT). Under the council bylaws which reflected Austin Independent School District and Texas Senate Bill I, the new CACs were to work on reviewing the needs of students, developing campus plans to increase achievement, and creating schools in which all students could be successful (AISD, 1995).

The switch from CLTs to CACs which seemed to imply the shift from "leadership" roles to "advisory" still maintained parental participation in decision making roles. The inclusion of parents and community leaders in campus decisions through the CAC was an attempt to build stronger communication and promote support for the schools. The school was to involve parents in the goal setting process and other decisions (SB 11.251b). According to the "District, Area and Campus Advisory Councils Handbook with Bylaws" (AISD, 1995),

The purpose of the councils is to insure that the goals and the plans of the district and campuses are focused on student learning, have been established with the involvement of parents, community and staff, and are reviewed and evaluated annually to improve the performance of students (AISD, 1995, p.2).

Although the restructuring was part of a district decision, staff members were not able to explain why the change occurred. The assistant principal did comment in an informal discussion that the CLTs were changed because "the groups [CLTs] thought they had too much power and they needed to remember that the principal has the ultimate say in things." While parents were still involved in the CACs, the Parent Training Specialist felt the change had resulted in a lesser role for parents. She stated:

That (CAC) used to be called the CLT, the Campus Leadership Team, and at that time it was more of a decision making body. At that time parents could come and decisions were made. Last year it changed over to more of an advisory role. I think that parents had more say so when CLT was a decision making board rather than an advisory board. I don't see that the parents have as much decision making in that particular organization [CAC].

The number of parents actually participating in decision making roles was affected by the guidelines for council representatives.

Representation on Campus Advisory Councils

According to the school district "Handbook with Bylaws," the CAC membership at the elementary level was to include 6-8 parents and 6-8 professional staff members plus

two classified members, one business partner, one citizen, and one principal (AISD, 1995). A parent representative was defined as a resident in the school district with a child in the particular school. The parent could not be an employee of the district. Two positions were to be filled by parents from the school's PTA/PTO with one being the president or designee of the president. Two positions were parents selected by the principal and the other two positions were parents selected by the CAC from a list of volunteers. Schools with more than 1000 students were required to have an additional two CAC members chosen by a random drawing from the list of volunteers. Schools with only six parent representatives were required to select one by lottery and one from the volunteer list (AISD, 1995).

Although the guidelines for selecting representatives seemed complicated, according to the participants interviewed in this study, parent representatives on Parker's CAC were simply asked to serve. The school staff sent out two notices in the school newsletter concerning the issue of Campus Advisory Councils. The September 1996 newsletter stated, "The CAC is a group of parents and teachers that meet once a month and make recommendations that focus on student achievement. Forms are available for anyone who would like to recommend an agenda item related to budget, curriculum, teacher staffing and training or school wide services" (September 1996). In the spring of 1997, the Parker newsletter stated, "Our Campus Advisory Council meets once a month to discuss issues that are important to the education of our children. During the next two months, we will be looking for people who are interested in serving in this role next school year. Serving on the CAC is a two year commitment" (Parker Newsletter, February 1997).

More commonly, teachers submitted names of parents who could possibly serve and a list was compiled. Office staff contacted these parents and asked them to serve as representatives. Many parents first contacted could not make the two year commitment resulting in the assignment of the current five parent representatives. The move to CACs theoretically had the potential for more parental representation on the site based management committee. In theory, this gave parents more influence as decision makers. These changes no longer limited parents to the role of fund-raisers and volunteers. Their voice and participation in the school's decision making process was now state mandated.

However, because few parents volunteered in the school's initial request for representatives, teachers were asked to submit names of parents. Once again the teachers nominated the more active and visible parents at the school reinforcing their participation but not reaching out to new parents. The limited information which was provided to parents did not state what the school expected from them as representatives. Their duties included taking requests and concerns and gathering input from the parents each was

selected to serve on the CAC (AISD, 1995). As the assistant principal described, "Part of being on CAC is informing the rest of the staff and the rest of the parents, so that's also something that when you serve in that capacity . . . we're asking that they go out and tell people what we're going to discuss." However, in discussions with parent representatives, it became clear that in actuality none of the representatives personally solicited input from other parents. Parent representative Ms. Liguez described her role, "I see my role in being, just being like a filter almost in terms of the decisions that are being made, in terms of like making sure that parents' input and viewpoint is listened to." She admitted to speaking only on occasion to her own small group of friends. On one observed occasion the Spanish speaking parent representative shared information with other parents. At the parent Valentine workshop, Mrs. Chavez invited parents to come to the site visit and talk with the area superintendent. While a few CAC representatives did share information with their neighbors or personal friends, none actually spoke for the group they were elected to represent. There was very little communication between the CAC parent representatives and the parents they served.

The principal though had a different perspective. Principal Caro thought that if the topic was of interest to the parents then the news would get out to them. She explained,

We've never told them to go out and solicit. We do tell them the items with enough time that like when the dress code came up. I know they communicated because I had people come who had never been. They came to that CAC meeting. So, I know that if the interest is there, if it's something that they want to know about, the information is going to get out. Probably a lot of time it may not, because maybe the term is more generic in terms of like when I say, when you talk about curriculum, instruction, you talk about budget. Those are the things that they don't really associate. You start talking about dress code or you start talking about cafeteria or those kinds of things and then that may become more, because that's where their interest is, and so I know at those times when they've wanted to find out things they have been able to.

These comments touched on two important issues concerning parental involvement. The school staff did not seem to consistently keep parents informed. They relied on social networks to get CAC information out to other parents. Only in cases where decisions had already been made did the staff include the information in the school newsletter. Since the CAC parent representatives did not regularly go out and solicit opinions from parents, talking instead to their personal friends, many parents remained uninformed. In fact, of the 30 parents who were not CAC representatives interviewed for this study, all replied they were not involved in making decisions about the school. None of these parents could describe how parents were represented on the Campus Advisory Council and only one knew what issues were discussed at these meetings. Nineteen of the parents could not remember receiving any type of information regarding the CAC. Mrs. Nava, a parent, Delores C. Peña

AERA/1998

stated, "They've never, to see maybe the minutes would be interesting or to see what they've talked about, but I've never seen any of that." Parents at Parker were not kept informed about the CAC and its decisions. Another concern evident in the principal's comments was the assumption that parents were not interested in the issues CAC discussed. However, in interviews many parents expressed a need to know more as Mrs. Morales summarized, "We should, you know, if it's something that's being voted on."

The 1996-97 Campus Advisory Council (CAC) at Parker included twenty members, seven of whom were parents. These parents, five women and two men were all Mexican American. Five of these parents, including the parent chairperson continued to serve on the 1997-98 CAC. One parent representative spoke only Spanish while the others were bilingual. Their educational levels ranged from six years in schools in Mexico to several years of college in the U. S. The PTO representative on Parker's CAC was not chosen until late January. The other CAC members included the principal, two classified representatives, one community representative, and seven teacher representatives for a total of seventeen members. Of these other representatives all but three were Mexican American. The parent representatives although not intentionally selected to do so, did represent the two main parent groups, the Spanish speaking parents who mainly served on the Playground Committee and the English speaking Mexican Americans who participated in the PTO. There were two parent representatives from both groups. The parent CAC chairperson was not involved in either parent organization.

There were two chairpersons to the CAC, a parent and a teacher representative. Guidelines stipulated that the principal could not serve as the chair. Some of the duties of the chair included establishing the agenda with the principal and presiding at all meetings. Some meetings were conducted by the chairs, but it was basically a formality only. Although the chair introduced the items on the agenda, it was the principal who then took over the discussion because she was the person with the information. The extent of how much input the chairs had in the creation of the agenda was not known, but observations showed that they did not have enough information to actually conduct the meeting.

According to the state statutory requirements, "a parent who is an employee of the school district is not considered a parent representative on the committee" (Department of Accountability and School Accreditation, 1996, p. 3). Based on this requirement, Parker's CAC was not fulfilling the guidelines. One of the parent representatives worked as a bus monitor, coordinated the After School and the Adopt-a-School Programs, and occasionally helped out in the office. By working for the district, she did not qualify to serve as a parent representative of the CAC, but yet she had been a member for two years. One of the teacher representatives noted that this parent was an employee and should not be serving as

a parent representative. Mrs. Moreno, who was both a parent and school secretary, was told, "If you work as office staff, then you can't [serve as a CAC representative]." Yet, the school did keep Mrs. Prezas, another employee, on the CAC. The principal pointed out that when the parent originally had been appointed to the CAC, she was president of PTA. In fact, with so many internal changes regarding which role parent representatives were serving, either as elected representatives, representatives of PTA, or appointed by the principal, it was difficult to know when guidelines were not being followed.

The CAC did not necessarily follow other rules. For example, CAC materials stated, "Three absences will automatically terminate a CAC member." The community representative missed several meetings during the year but the issue of attendance was never addressed. While it was possible that the principal spoke to this person privately, rules were not strictly enforced. Parent representatives identified themselves as such without knowing who they were representing. The principal said:

Most of the parents that are on the CAC were volunteered or were recruited based on expression of interest, based on questions that they had asked about the school, just a variety of things. There were other parents that were approached except maybe couldn't make the time commitment. There were some parents who did it for a year and that wasn't maybe where their interest was. So, the group that we have now are people who really want to be there, they enjoy it and they've been real good. They've been real committed, so that's real nice.

The parents currently serving were not distinctly serving in one capacity or another although all were completing their second term. Because the PTO representative who normally was the PTO president could not commit to the CAC because of her schedule, a new representative was selected. However, for the entire first semester the CAC did not include a PTO representative. When one was chosen by the PTO, the representative was not a parent at Parker. According to one teacher representative, this person had been brought in to help PTO because of their past problems, but she had no parental role at the school. This representative briefly attended one meeting in January but did not participate because of a conflict in her schedule.

Training for Representatives

Parent representatives were provided with a training session at which the bylaws and guidelines of the district were distributed. The principal shared with me that this is only the second year the district had provided training for CAC representatives. While the 1995 training session was a full day, the 1996 training session offered in September was cut to two hours. None of the representatives from Parker attended since they were all completing their second year of membership.

Mr. Adame, parent chairperson, described what he learned from the training session in this way:

I went to a function, a nine, ten hour function on a Saturday for people that wanted to be on their, area, district and school council, whatever, they all met at that one meeting. We congregated and were basically brought around what it stands for, what you're here for, and what aspect can you help. We don't make the law. We just try to make it more feasible. . . It's a process that you're involved in.

However, to parent representative, Mr. Posada, the training session was not helpful. He explained:

Well, after the first meeting, we started talking about budgets and then I went to the makeup session and they were just talking about the information they were giving, all they talked about was organizational, they talked about parliamentary procedures, just how to run a meeting, not exactly what to look for, you know, for financial statements or what money's going to and how you can move money from one area to another and what are the programs it can effect throughout the school.

Based on my observations, the training session was brief, filled with educational jargon, and seemed to emphasize to the representatives that they were only advisory. The speakers repeatedly stressed, "you're role is advisory," and, "It is the principal who has accountability for the whole school." According to the district representatives, the CAC representatives should know how the people they represent feel but they should also remember that the principal may differ from the CAC decision because "the principal has all the picture." The training session briefly reviewed the handbook and then in groups the parents reviewed CIPs from different schools since writing the Campus Improvement Plan was one of the main duties of the CAC.

CAC Requirements

Campus Advisory Councils are required to meet a minimum of nine times in one school year (May 1-April 30) (AISD, 1995). Meetings are open to all members of the school community, and schools are required to publicize the scheduled meetings at least two weeks in advance (AISD, 1995). The bylaws state, "Activities of the CAC should be well-publicized to all in the school community" (AISD, 1995, p. 14). Agendas are to be posted at least one week before the meeting (AISD, 1995) and schools are to make available a copy of the CAC minutes as well as the minutes from Area and District Advisory Councils (AISD, 1995). The 1997-98 Staff Handbook for Parker Elementary also stated, "Minutes should be recorded and distributed to all staff members within three days of meeting date. Minutes that reflect the educational program of the school will also be posted on the large bulletin board located by the office." The school "publicized" CAC meetings by writing them into the school calendar distributed at the beginning of each month.

Although the office staff assured me that the minutes were posted after each meeting,

Delores C. Peña

AERA/1998

during the year of this study I never observed any posting on the bulletin board of either agendas or minutes.

According to the bylaws and SB11 Sec. 11.253g, the CAC must also "host one community meeting annually to review progress and report to the parents and community how the campus performed on the state accountability system" (AISD, 1995, p. 5). Because the school is required to hold this meeting within 90 days of receiving the report card, parents are ensured of an opportunity to assess the progress of the school. Parker Elementary did publicize this meeting on the school's marquee and in notices sent home to parents however, parent turnout at the January meeting was extremely low. No one on the school's faculty was present except for the principal, assistant principal, and the Parent Training Specialist. While turnout was extremely low with only three staff members and nine parents, the administrative staff did a thorough job of explaining the school's overall student progress in both Spanish and English. According to the TAAS report for students tested in the spring of 1997, Parker Elementary had an accountability rating of acceptable. The school group (median) scores were: reading 77.5%, writing 88.2%, mathematics 70.5%, and all tests taken 70.5%. For the school (all students), scores were: reading 62.9%, writing 62.8%, mathematics 50.6%, and all tests taken 41.4%. The parents present participated by asking questions. For example, Mr. Posada questioned if the school's curriculum was different than the test to account for the low passing rates. Principal Caro explained that the curriculum was the same and that teachers were teaching children test taking strategies to increase their success. The principal and the assistant principal provided examples of the TAAS test questions. Each used visual transparencies of the test to demonstrate to parents how students were being taught to answer the test questions. They modeled how to work with their children and reminding parents of things they could do at home to practice. While the TAAS strategies did not provoke much dialogue, parents' concerns regarding the proposed move of all sixth graders to middle school was an important topic. One parent, Mrs. Chavez, stated she saw a problem with moving the fifth graders directly up to sixth grade because they had not been prepared to go to sixth grade in a middle school. The principal agreed saying the students had not received an orientation. As principal, Mrs. Caro had not received any news on the school board decision and she urged the parents to talk to the school board members and voice their opinions.

Role of the Campus Advisory Council

The CAC's objective is to be involved in decisions concerning planning, budgeting, curriculum, staffing patterns, staff development, and school organization (AISD, 1995). However according to the district guidelines, "the final decision for any CAC

recommendation is made by the principal who is held accountable for all operations of the school" (AISD, 1995, p. 10). The objectives of the CAC and statements like this one and those at the training session seemed contradictory. Even the Parent Training Specialist, when a teacher asked about changing the day for a school-wide celebration, stated, "We were told we were not a decision making body, we're an advisory board." Confusion seemed to exist as to whether the role of the CAC was advisory or decision making as was evident during my interview with the assistant principal. Ms. Garcia stated, "Yes, well, it is advisory but it does make decisions too. It's both, but the principal does as the ultimate say but the idea is to come to consensus."

At one of the fall CAC meetings in which the group reviewed the draft of the Campus Improvement Plan, the role of the CAC members was clearly evident. Grammatical and structural changes were quickly accepted by the principal, but concerns over big issues like curriculum were "discussed." For example, two teachers asked about the listing of "Best Practices" on the CIP and the principal answered that this program was a curriculum. One of teachers asked why the curriculum was listed on the CIP implying that if they were using this curriculum, the school did not have a copy of it. The principal changed her response and said the list was a collection of ideas that made up "Best Practices." The response seemed to contradict the principal's earlier statement about the curriculum. One parent representative asked how the CAC could be considered a decision making body when it had been stressed to them that they were advisory. The principal's answer was so confusing that the parent representative simply replied, "I'll add advisory to decision making." She seemed to give up trying to understand her role and simply wrote in the change on her copy of the CIP. In our discussions, the parent representative, Ms. Liguez explained further:

Here at the CAC, it's been told time and time again that's not the way it's run here, purely advisory, an advisory capacity and so decisions can be implemented or can not be implemented depending on the principal. I think that there are other examples where parents maybe are empowered a little bit more in terms of site based decision making. But it's been stressed time and time and time again it's purely advisory. [The] Austin American Statesman ran a whole series of articles about site based decision making and that was supposed to have been the policy of AISD but apparently it's been watered down, apparently it's not followed to the letter. It's like if this little bit is tossed to me well I have to be content with that little bit.

Judging from these comments, the role of the CAC is not completely understood by some of the members, parents and teachers alike. In fact, one teacher representative asked a representative from a teachers' association to attend a CAC meeting and answer questions regarding this issue. During this meeting, the guest speaker explained that the main role of

CAC was to develop and revise the CIP for the purpose of improving student performance. The areas of decision making were listed as planning, budgeting, curriculum, staffing patterns, staff development, and school organization. However, the representative stated both verbally and in the provided written materials that, "The final decision rests with the principal who is held accountable for all operations of the school." The principal then mentioned that at the training session the area superintendent had said advisory at least five times and asked why that emphasis. The speaker replied that if a CAC made a decision which the principal did not like, then the principal would be "stupid" to change the decision but that they had the power to do so.

The speaker really seemed to point out once again that the role of CAC was to advise but the principal had the ultimate say in the decisions being made. Therefore, the consensus of district workers was that the CAC was an advisory body. This role though contradicted my discussions with members of the Texas Education Agency and a review of their documents which reported that each school is required to have a decision making group and that advisory groups were optional. The professional responsibilities of the principal hold her accountable for the entire school and the decisions made. The issue of professionalization influenced how much authority the principal was willing to give up and how much decision making power was available to the CAC. In fact, Mrs. Caro seemed to imply this reasoning in her interview for this study. When asked if parents had any influence in regards to decision making, Principal Caro replied:

If you ask some parents, they'll probably say no . . . sometimes they, things that they would like to make decisions, on that's not really part of their ability to do. That parents influence the decisions made at this school, yes. They say that they recommend, but in essence what they decided on the budget, was what was done. Sometimes recommendations cannot be done because part of the picture is not there or they don't know the impact that it's going to have on this other thing. So, those are things that I still ultimately am responsible for the entire school community and so I'm going to have to look at that . . .

The principal seemed to imply that some decisions must be made by her and not the council because she had more information. More importantly, she was being held accountable which weighed heavily on her ability to give up some control over the decision making process. The accountability system set up by the state limited the power of the decision making teams they endorsed. Principals still maintained control and teacher and parent representatives were frequently relegated to roles which in actuality held very little decision making power. While this issue concerned several members of the CAC, when given an opportunity to raise their concerns in a district survey only two representatives indicated they disagreed with the statement, "This CAC is involved in the decision making process

for the campus.” Twelve members agreed seeming to be content with their advisory role. This advisory role was exhibited in the CAC meetings.

Campus Advisory Council Meetings

A review of the 1996-97 CAC minutes showed that the group met for nine regular meetings and one specially called meeting. The average attendance for parent representatives was five out of the seven representatives present at each regular meeting (non-school members were not called for the special meeting). The CAC dealt with a variety of issues including budget, staff roles and responsibilities, student incentives, TAAS recommendations, and concerns over the transferring of 100 students to Parker. In February of 1998, the CAC did make decisions regarding guidelines for people wishing to address the CAC. The group decided that guidelines for guest speakers included: a sign-in process to speak to the council, a two minute limit for each speaker, and a 30 minute time limit for all guest speakers. One parent representative commented that if many parents came to speak, it would be worthwhile to stay and listen. The principal agreed by commenting that if many parents came and said the same thing it was indicative of how the neighborhood felt and that they needed to listen.

The main job of the CAC was to organize the school’s Campus Improvement Plan and their budget. The 1997-98 budget included \$8,300 in CIP expenditures and \$63,500 in Title I expenditures. According to the budget, the Parent Training Specialist had \$300 assigned to her specifically while \$500 was budgeted for Family Math Night and \$1,900 for a variety of parent activities in the areas of literacy, math, science and cultural. The Campus Improvement Plan was developed by the cadres last year and reviewed by the CAC and staff this school year. The school’s CIP listed the three goals which Parker Elementary was working toward during 1997-98. These goals included:

LITERACY: To produce fluent critical readers.

MATH: To increase students’ math achievement through best practices which build greater understanding of mathematical concepts.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT: To establish and maintain a partnership between Parker school and parents to ensure active involvement in their children's learning (Parker Elementary Campus Improvement Plan, 1997-98).

The CIP listed the rationale for this third goals as, “Parental involvement in their child’s education is critical to the academic and social success of students.”

The importance of parental involvement was stressed in the school’s Campus Improvement Plan which identified areas of involvement and funding for parental activities. Parents were considered a partner in the learning process. The role of parents as decision makers and how they worked to achieve the above goals will be further examined in the following chapter.

Issues Affecting Decision Making

During interviews with parents and staff, several issues which influenced the role of parents as decision making were revealed. The Parent Training Specialist while commenting on the diminished decision making role of the CAC also mentioned the need for representatives to be people who were not easily intimidated. She stressed the need for representatives to be able to question the principal and not simply agree all the time. However, as previously mentioned most of the representatives understood their role to be advisory and left the decision making to the principal. Mr. Posada stated, "We have made some decisions but many times we can only advise because it would have to go to a subcommittee of teachers who would actually make that decision because they're the professionals or they know more about the decision making that's going to be made." This parent's comments addressed the issue of professionalization: the belief that teachers as professionals are more capable of making decisions than the parents. This point of view diminished the ability of parents to make decisions because they believed teachers should make the decisions.

Another factor was the information provided to CAC members. This issue was a concern for the representatives since, according to the principal, last year the group had requested they get the agenda and relevant information before the meetings. Although the CAC members may have received a detailed agenda, the staff themselves only received a brief listing of topics on the CAC agenda twice during the 1997-98 school year. Principal Caro said, "We try as much as we can to send things ahead of time. Like they got the CIP ahead of time, they got the budget ahead of time, so that at least when they come to the meeting they have the stuff and they're not walking in cold, and that was at their request." However, some representatives disagreed with the principal's point of view. Ms. Liguez still felt they were not provided with sufficient information to discuss the issues. She commented, "It doesn't do any good for anyone to have an agenda if you don't have the backup material that goes with it. How can anyone reasonably discuss a budget when you're presented the figures right there at the meeting?" When provided with the information, some representatives still found it difficult to comprehend the educational language used. As Mr. Posada explained:

I don't think we're given enough information. They're throwing all these acronyms back and forth and you're trying to pick up on what's going on and it's moving too fast. You don't even [know] the programs they're referring to and the time limit, you only have so much time to do this meeting in . . . so they're going back and forth. You're trying to grasp what is going on and, before you know it, you go on to another project, another money-making decision.

Ms. Liguez, another parent representative agreed, commenting, “It’s taken me at least a year just to kind of get through the lingo.”

Teachers understood the difficulty parents faced in trying to stay informed. Mrs. Gutierrez recognized that the lack of information influenced how parents participated in the CAC. When asked if parents had any power in the decision-making process, Mrs. Gutierrez stated, “From being here in the past three years I would have to say no cause programs are implemented and yes, parents are surveyed but I’m not sure whether it’s clearly understood what they’re being asked and so it’s easy to get a yes.” However, Mr. Posada recognized that it was easy to misunderstand one issue as he was trying to understand another. He said, “If they’re just going to rough over you and you say well, you don’t know, yes, no, if it’s sounds, you’re hearing it from Mrs. Caro, and well, that sounds good coming from her. But you know, is there another side to the story what’s going to actually go on?” Therefore, even when parents were included in the decision making process, their role was affected by many issues.

Another concern affecting parental involvement in decision making as stated previously was the school’s reliance on social networks to distribute information. The principal’s comments revealed that if the issue was important then other parents would hear the information. Parent representative Mrs. Prezas stated, “If I think the issue is real important and I think I need parents here, oh yes, I do (solicit parent information).” However, once again assumptions were in place. If Mrs. Prezas thought parents needed to know, then she would share the information. When she did solicit parent opinions, she did so with her network of friends. The heavy reliance on social networks left many parents, particularly those not connected to particular networks, uninformed and uninvolved. The influence of social capital to involve parents and keep others disenfranchised will be discussed in chapter seven.

Meeting the Needs of Parents

The examination of the role of parents as decision makers raised several issues which influenced their involvement. The intent of this study was to provide information about parental involvement so both the school and the families would benefit. Through the following recommendations for both parents and teachers, parental involvement in various roles and the education of their children can be improved.

Manage Democracy

Although parents were involved in decision making roles at Parker, several factors could be changed to improve their participation and make their participation more successful. Both teachers and parents needed a clearer understanding of site based decision making guidelines. The confusion of the role of the Campus Advisory Council, greatly

influenced the participation of all the members. At these meetings, school staff needed to rely less on educational jargon, so that parent representatives could effectively participate. More importantly, parents needed the time and resources in the form of support materials in order to vote on issues addressed by the council. Principal Caro recognized this impact of time, particularly the two year term limit for representatives. She stated, "It takes a while to understand how schools operate. It takes a while for us to figure out [how] the schools operate and that's our business. And so for parents, to limit it to a two year term and that's it, to me we're almost going to hurt ourselves in that process." Once parent representatives on CAC began to understand the process, their term limit was over. Term limits needed to be extended to those parents who wished to continue their participation.

However, new and different parents also needed to be involved. Many parents referred to the same parents being involved all the time which influenced their power. As Mrs. Cano said, "The PTO, it seems like to me is that they have their favorites and maybe it's the ones that always go and those are the ones that always make the decisions." Some parents such as Mrs. Prezas had so much influence and power that it was viewed negatively by other parents. The power and influence of some parents in leadership positions created not only unequal representation but also control over decisions particularly through the PTO. To eliminate this situation, all parents needed to be represented in decision-making groups not just particular social networks.

Democratic principles seemed to have been violated at Parker. When parents had voiced their concerns about Mrs. Prezas, they were verbally embarrassed in front of other parents. As Mrs. Saenz said, "A veces uno por hablar lo que no debe hablar, a veces no le hablan a uno. (At times when one says what they should not say, some times no one will speak to you)." Parents who were not part of certain social networks were treated differently. The division between parent groups influenced this treatment and parent involvement. While Parker staff did place parents in positions of decision making, parents needed to know how to manage these positions, to follow democratic principles of representation and voting.

Value the Knowledge of Both Teachers and Parents

To increase parental involvement and invite parents into the schooling process as partners, the influence of professionalization needs to be decreased. Parents and teachers should work toward collaborative roles which are not bounded by professionalism. Teachers and parents have valuable knowledge to contribute toward the educational process. In order for parents to participate actively, they first needed to have the confidence to voice their opinions and concerns. To build this confidence, the efforts of parents should be recognized by the school staff. Parents who had showed personal

growth in their involvement during the year, such as CAC representative, Mrs. Chavez and Mrs. Trevino, should be encouraged and brought into the process of planning further parent activities. Mrs. Chavez although limited by her inability to speak English began to express herself more in the CAC meetings, asking questions and stating her opinions. Mrs. Trevino attended many of the scheduled parent workshops bringing along her younger children, participating with confidence.

Active parents such as these should be part of the planning process. To facilitate this process, forums for discussion between parents and school staff need to be created. In order to take advantage of parental suggestions, the "threat" of parental involvement needs to be reduced among teachers. As Mrs. Garza stated,

How to get the parent into the school, well, make the parent feel more welcome. See? But at the same time the teacher feels threatened, because they think that the parent is there just to watch over them, to see what they are doing, and if they are doing right. So, sometimes they don't want them in there, because they feel like that. But see if they would open up the communication, they would maybe be able to see no, I'm not here to judge you, criticize you or nothing.

Teachers need to realize that parents simply want to be included and informed regarding the education of their children. To accomplish this goal though, teacher education in area of parental involvement needs to be further explored.

Examine the Ideology of Parents and their Social Capital and Incorporate

The research has identified the positive value of social networks which influence educational success. However, the negative influence of social networks must also be considered. At Parker, social networks were used to exclude other parents. Parents not associated with the parents in leadership positions were not kept as informed of school decisions as parents within these social networks.

Instead, social networks need to be used to provide information to all parents and to involve new and other parents in the educational process. The assumption that parents know how to get involved can not be made. Parents may not know how they can help their child and the school if they are not informed of the process and the many ways they can help. This lack of knowledge was particularly important to parents who were new to the schooling process or the school.

Parental involvement includes participation in many phases. The school must provide opportunities for parents in all of them, not just those that are more convenient or easy to facilitate. More importantly, though are the needs of parents. School staff must survey parents about their needs and ideas in order to plan activities which meet their needs. For example, the lack of PTO meetings which involved the students was mentioned by several teachers and parents in interviews. These activities were successful and parents and

teachers missed the opportunity to meet together. Parents also voiced their needs by their attendance at various activities. Parent activities in which the parents were merely being talked to had low turnout such as Pizza/Coffee with the Principal or the TAAS report meeting. Activities which included parents and their children such as Family Math Night and teacher-parent conferences and those in which parents made educational tools such as the ABC books or the KLRU workshops were most successful. The parents were silently voicing their needs and interests and the school should provide opportunities which meet these concerns.

To make these planned activities were successful, the school must also take into account the factors which influence parental involvement. Lack of child care and working several jobs influenced parent attendance. The school staff needs to work to meet the needs of most parents, providing activities which meet at times which are more convenient to parents and providing child care. At Parker the biggest influence may have been the history of division between parent groups. Principal Caro summarized:

That's the past and I don't want to do what people are doing and keep bringing up the past cause you don't ever get passed it. I don't want to do that because if it comes out in anyway, it just kind of stirs that up again and that's kind of died down for awhile and that's not an issue anymore so, I'd rather not bring that back up. I think that the divisions between them (playground & PTO) the lines are a lot fainter.

However, the division continued to exist and influence parents' participation. To increase parental involvement, these issues needed to be addressed and not ignored. The continued association of Mrs. Prezas in PTO, negated any of the positive influence of changing the image of PTO. She continued as the primary decision maker, therefore, limiting the possibility of attracting new parents into the organization.

Rely less on Assumptions and Open Lines of Communication

In discussions with the school staff, the principal's view was insightful. She believed that parents were involved at the level they wished to be, and that only when they were ready to move to another level would parents listen to or find information concerning the next level of involvement. The principal described parental involvement as a series of stages similar to those revealed in the literature. Her belief was supported by some of the parents who started as volunteers in classrooms and eventually worked for the school or were in decision making roles. However, presuming that parents were not ready or even willing to consider to other forms of involvement, such as decision-making roles, limited their opportunities. The school staff and parents in lead positions can not continue to make assumptions of what other parents need and want.

The school needs to work toward including all parents at various levels. To include more parents, the school needs to communicate regularly with parents through various

methods. Parker staff relied on written newsletters, calendars, the marquee, and flyers, however, all of these forms of communication assumed parents could read. Parents who could not read or did not use social networks to gain information were left uninformed. Instead, schools need to establish a welcoming climate and open door policy so that parents who have questions can feel confident enough to come to the school.

Create a Hierarchy of Involvement Opportunities for Parents

Opportunities for involvement at each level should be made available to all parents.

As Mrs. Garza stated:

You got to get the parents into the classroom. I'm here to help you. Because I think the parents got more to offer than just cutting paper or selling a piece of cake at lunch time. I think they have a lot more to offer if they were given the chance.

Parental involvement includes different stages from home involvement to decision making and the school should work toward creating this hierarchy of involvement opportunities. Once the school staff, with the help of parents, has planned activities at various stages, they need to educate parents in how to be involved in each stage. As Principal Caro said not all parents will be ready or willing to participate in certain levels. She said, "And at the same time depending on your present situation as a parent you may or may not be ready for the next level of involvement," however, the decision needs to be made by parents. Parents then armed with sufficient information as to what would be required of them, should decide which parental involvement role they prefer.

Parents and teachers need to work together to provide involvement opportunities in order to acquire the many benefits for the students. Parental involvement increases student achievement and parents in the interviews understood how their involvement affected the education of their children. With parents and teachers working together, academic success can be possible for all children.

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