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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and examines the effectiveness of a project undertaken by Florida's Palm Beach County school system to provide community based support services and to facilitate a community-school partnership in order to enhance the educational achievement of immigrant students, specifically those with limited English proficiency. The project relies on school and community resources including guidance counselors, teachers of English as a Second Language, health and mental health professionals, churches, and migrant services personnel. It engages in a variety of multilingual activities, including school visits, tutoring, mentoring, home visits, parent workshops, counseling, guidance to community services, and college/career awareness. Data for this paper came from field notes and weekly project reports of team members, proceedings of weekly team meetings, and focus group interviews with team members and the project director. Overall, the project was effective in the context of immigrant education, providing services not offered by any other agency to students, parents, and families and offering support to teachers in schools. There were no significant improvements in students' standardized test scores and grades, though it is likely that while students were improving their work, such changes might not necessarily be manifested in standardized test scores. (Contains 24 references.) (SM)

WHAT DIFFERENCE DO WE MAKE? THE CHALLENGES OF EVALUATING COMMUNITY-BASED EFFORTS IN IMMIGRANT EDUCATION

Dilys Schoorman

Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association
Seattle, WA
April 10-14, 2001

What difference do we make? The challenges of evaluating community-based efforts in immigrant education

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a community-based project that was designed to facilitate increased academic achievement of immigrant students (specifically those with limited English proficiency) by mediating the cultural gap that typically exists between schools and the community. This collaborative community network engages in a variety of multilingual activities including school visits, home visits, parent workshops, counseling, guidance to community services and college/career awareness. This paper discusses the achievements of the project, the challenges it faces, and difficulties in evaluating its community impact. Underscored in this discussion in the need for the development of alternate evaluation paradigms which will adequately capture the impact of such "grassroots" level projects.

Introduction

Immigration to the USA has contributed to dramatic shifts in the educational system in several states over the past two decades. It is estimated that the immigrant population nationwide will continue to grow at the rate of approximately one million each year and that currently, one in every five children enrolled in school is an immigrant. This percentage is much higher in the state of Florida, the context for this study, where the immigrant population is the third highest in the nation. Immigrant students face multiple challenges, including those stemming from cultural, social, economic and educational factors, in their adaptation to life in the USA (Rumbaut, 1995; Schoorman, 2001). As such, students' academic success is dependent on their successful negotiation of these challenges as they "bridge the gap" between their native culture and the cultures of their new home and school (Dentler & Hafner, 1997; Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998). In such a context, it becomes imperative that the partnership between home and school, deemed important for all students, moves beyond rhetoric to become reality for immigrant students.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a project undertaken by the Palm Beach County school system to provide community based support services and to facilitate a community-school partnership in order to enhance the educational achievement of immigrant students (currently tracked as students with limited English proficiency). The project provides students a broad range of services outside of the immediate school context (such as tutoring, mentoring, family counseling) that are intended to increase their chances of academic success. Through a critical analysis of the experiences of the project workers as they strive to build and maintain the community-school partnership, this paper presents a discussion of the achievements and the challenges in the implementation of the project.

Theoretical perspectives

The project exemplifies the principles of critical emancipatory action research which is characterized by a philosophical commitment to democracy in education (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Noffke,1995; Zeichner & Gore, 1995). It was designed to address the needs of the increasing immigrant population in the county and is rooted in a commitment to the successful integration of this population

into the community and, particularly, into the school system. As such, the project is designed to serve the needs of a group that has often been marginalized by school systems (Gibson,1998; 1995; 1987; Olsen, 1997; 1995; 1988). Central to the implementation of the project is the constant self-assessment and ongoing modification of the implementation strategies by the project director and team members. This paper is the outcome of the biennial evaluation of the project.

Drawing on the principles of critical pedagogy and a social reconstructionist perspective, this study presents a critical evaluation of the project's achievements (Giroux, 1992; 1989; McLaren 1998; Sleeter & Grant, 1999). Central to this evaluation is the examination of the educational context in which the project is implemented which manifests patterns of institutionalized discrimination, inflexible bureaucracy, and overworked or disengaged personnel. This context of challenges presents a unique backdrop against which to assess the achievements of the project. Such contextualization stands in stark contrast to more "traditional" forms of evaluation which demand, either implicitly or explicitly, significant differences in test scores as the "true" measure of "making a difference" in a student's life. This tension and its political, social and economic implications are central to the discussion of the results of this study.

Research on immigrants has typically focused on the diagnosis of their needs as they adapt to their new environment. These studies, many of which are grounded in the field of sociology, have shown that immigrants experience a complex set of adaptation challenges that emerge from cultural, societal, economic, political and educational factors (Schoorman, 2001). Significant among these challenges in their impact on students' education are language barriers, unfamiliarity with the US educational culture and the perceived or actual powerlessness of students' families to engage school administrators and teachers on behalf of their children (Rumbaut, 1995; Olsen, 1997; 1988). Studies of the educational experiences of immigrant students have generally relied on surveys to yield data on a limited range of issues such as enrollments and academic achievement (Rong & Preissle, 1998; Schwartz, 1996; Vernes & Abrahamse, 1996). Ethnographic studies (Gibson1998; 1995; 1987; Olsen1997; 1988;) have documented from a school-based perspective, the struggles of immigrant students as they negotiate life in the new culture. The work of Phelan, Davidson and Yu (1998) has

noted the importance of cultural border crossings among students' worlds of school, family and peers in their academic success.

While this literature base, cumulatively, has identified diverse "needs" of immigrant students, few have focused on how those needs are being addressed. The contribution of this paper is unique in two ways. First, examines actual implementation efforts in immigrant education, taking the discussion beyond the diagnosis of needs to possible responses to such needs. Second, because of the nature of the project, it focuses on efforts that are community-based, rather than school-based. This type of work has been less documented in the literature on immigrant education. It is intended that this project be considered for replication where appropriate.

Description of Project

The "HOMES" (a pseudonym) project is a multifaceted, system-wide effort to develop and implement community and school collaboration in the education of immigrant students. It is in its third year of operation. Central to this project is a collaborative referral system that draws on school and community resources including guidance counselors, teachers of English as a second language, health and mental health professionals, churches and migrant services personnel. Project efforts include mentoring and tutoring services in after care programs, guidance counseling, home visitations, student and family workshops in three languages, and college out-reach programs. These efforts are coordinated and implemented by a team of six multilingual parent liaisons and three bilingual and bicultural counselors (who spend four days a week in multiple schools) and are supervised by the project director. This paper will focus of the efforts and experiences of this team in its first two years of operation. The "HOMES" currently operates in eight schools in the district, serving the needs of approximately 4,000 immigrant students.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this paper was collected from the following sources: field notes and weekly project reports of team members, proceedings of weekly team meetings, and focus group interviews conducted with team members. Additional interviews were also conducted with the project director and selected team members to explore particular

experiences in greater depth. The weekly meetings and project reports offered the opportunity for constant comparative analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This analysis yielded two categories of information: data pertaining to achievements and challenges experienced by the project team. As a part of the biennial evaluation of the project, this data was analyzed further through a comparison with project objectives as well as by noting accomplishments that were originally unanticipated. Several themes pertaining to the achievements and challenges were identified.

Achievements

During the first two years of implementation, the project team had accomplished several goals, especially those identified in their grant proposal as "process outcomes".

Process outcomes

Setting up the network: One of the first tasks for the establishment of the project was to set up a collaborative community network that is central to the project's operation. The project team is made up of members of eleven other community-based organizations, thereby enabling greater collaboration among agencies. These agencies include student/family support networks, family health and wellness agencies, college outreach programs, adult migrant education programs and the district's Child Advocacy Board. Furthermore, networking relationships have been established among churches, health agencies, psychological and mental health organizations, social service organizations, institutions of higher education and culture-specific community service organizations. Additional networking has taken place through monthly radio shows that air in Spanish and Haitian Creole.

Parent Workshops and instructional materials: A central facet of the HOMES project is the orientation of parents to understanding the academic challenges of their children in an unfamiliar cultural and educational environment. To this end, four workshops were created on the following topics: Study Skills for LEP Students, Parent Teacher Conference, How to Register Your Child, and Test Taking Skills. These workshops have been developed in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole. Additional tailor-made workshops based on specific requests from parents have been conducted on a variety of topics. These include reading a report card, explaining standardized tests, positive

discipline, increasing self esteem, questions for guidance counselors and tips for parents. In addition, instructional materials for targeted students, parent information packages, homework tips and home/school learning packets have been prepared for use when needed.

Tutoring and mentoring: Eight after-school programs have been set up in schools, community agencies and two churches where a total of 600 language minority students are tutored everyday. Additionally mentoring programs have also been set up in each after school facility and three mentor training workshops have been offered annually. Students' families have also been targeted through adult education programs offered for speakers of Haitian Creole and Spanish.

The daily routine of the team: Officially, the team spends four school days each week visiting two or three target schools and addressing the referrals that they get from teachers, guidance counselors or administrators. These referrals pertain to behavior problems, academic difficulties, perceived cross cultural struggles, the necessity to translate information to be sent to students' homes and a variety of other issues that face students with Limited English Proficiency. Each Friday the team reports to the project office for a weekly team meeting. In addition to their school-based duites, the team members visit after school sites, conduct home visits, present workshops and/or follow up on cases. These follow-up activities could lead them to hospitals, churches and neighborhoods that are considered "unsafe". They have received calls at night (e.g. a parent calls to report that a child was beaten up after school), and the lateness of the hour does not always preclude action by the team member. Getting to the root of the problem that confronts a family and making every effort to resolve it are crucial goals for team members.

Community impact

While the conducting of workshops or home visits can be documented and reported as achievements, what is frequently unrepresented in project evaluations is the impact of project workers in these diverse contexts. Analysis of the interview data revealed that the project team played multiple roles within the community. These roles were captured in the following themes: team members as a) community magnets, b) advocates, c) road maps, d) door knockers, and e) cultural brokers.

Team members as community magnets: One of the outcomes of the work of the project team within the community was that they began to be sought out by community members, (whereas in the initial stages of the project this seeking out was typically in the opposite direction.) Team members discussed how parents would determine their off-duty routines and be waiting for them at salons as team members showed up for weekly hair appointments, or meet them at church to discuss problems. It must be noted that these intrusions on the team members' personal time was viewed as positive; they were glad for the opportunity to keep in touch with the community and to continue to address the issues that were central to their work day.

Team members as advocates: Another service offered by the team was that they would engage in advocacy within the school on behalf of immigrant students and their families. In a context where many families were unfamiliar with the educational practices of the USA, and /or were not as fluent or comfortable communicating in English, the team members would raise questions or make instructional requests on behalf of the students. For instance, it was noted that a student had not been assigned a Math class for two years in High School. Had it not been brought to the attention of the school administration by the team member, this student would not have taken any Math, nor would have been aware that such a class had to be taken, and would have automatically been at a disadvantage for any further study. Similar requests have been made about the provision of ESOL support or the placement of students in upper level tracks.

Team members as road maps: Team members also served as guides within the community to newcomers who were uncertain about cultural practices or community services available. Frequently, they direct students or family members to health clinics, housing agencies or clothing drives. It is in this role that the importance of the broad-based networking among community agencies becomes significant. In one case a team member working on the case of a student who was not performing academically discovered that the problem lay in the fact that the student had vision problems and couldn't see the board. At this point the team member helped the student to get a vision screening, obtain a prescription for glasses and find a sponsor to pay for the eye glasses. At other times they help students to find out information about colleges, college entrance

requirements or SAT preparation. One of the outcomes of the project has been the compiling of a directory of community-based organizations and services available to language minority families.

Team members as door knockers: This theme captures a facet of the weekly routine of many of the team members. They frequently make home visits to ascertain the basis of problems manifested in school. The issue all team members address on a frequent basis is drop-out prevention. Frequently this means that they find their way to the students' homes, convince them to get back to school and actually accompany them to the office to re-register. Often, home visits reveal cross cultural differences in approaches to education, where a student has missed school to help parents with translation, baby sitting, or to work. What is unique about this role is that it highlights the fact that the students served are not just those physically in school when the team member reports, but also includes those who are not in school.

Team members as cultural brokers: In bridging the potential gap between home and school, team members serve as cultural brokers mediating cultural differences between families and educators. This often occurs in the context of parent/teacher meetings where a team member serves as an interpreter, thus encourage more parent participation in such school functions. This role is also played out in the parent workshops where they explain the practices of the US educational system. Parents are instructed on when to expect and how to read a report card ("F" does not mean Fantastic as one child had made out), encouraged to ask questions of the school and their teachers (instead of assuming that the educators know best), and informed about school policies such as immunization requirements and the need for emergency information. Team members have also intervened in teacher/student encounters when teachers have misinterpreted the lack of eye contact or stance as disrespectful.

Challenges

The data also reveals several challenges that still need to be overcome. On the one hand, these challenges highlight the effectiveness of the accomplishments of the project team. On the other hand, they exemplify areas in which projected outcomes have yet to be reached.

Context of implementation

The context within which they work, though rarely required on a project report, provides a significant backdrop to assessing the achievements of the team. A significant facet of this context is the expectation of members of the community (i.e. educators and family members) that all problems relating immigrant students can be taken to the team members, and the assumption of the team that they ought to and will address all referrals that they received. Hence, team members deal with a wide range of problems that include behavior management, health issues, culture shock, family upheavals, housing or clothing needs, academic problems and language barriers. Furthermore, the team members' work day doesn't necessarily end; all of them, have received telephone calls at their homes and distress calls late at night.

Although the HOMES project has developed a network of agencies to help out with these needs, their goals are not always shared or appreciated by all parties. For instance, a significant part of their work is drop-out prevention. Yet, many educators are not as keen to see students re-registered in school. From an educator's perspective, such potential drop-outs were usually "trouble-makers" and their re-instatement in school only makes their work more difficult, especially when significant school work has been missed. Furthermore, these students are most likely to do poorly on standardized tests which, in this particular state, also lowers the overall grade of the school in state-wide ranking. In such a context it is inevitable that, instead of becoming partners in the education of certain students, schools and families (together with the project staff who act on their behalf) become antagonists. This leads to negative perceptions of and feeling towards the students and other representatives of that particular culture. It is not unusual for team members to hear derogatory remarks about students from different countries within the school setting.

Although the team members frequently act on behalf of the parents, such partnerships are not without their own tensions. Many times cultural barriers make intervention quite difficult. Considerable effort has been expended explaining to families who have not had significant formal education, the importance of sending their children to school, advocating for the continued education of girls or explaining to a parent that providing ESE services to a student is of academic benefit and NOT a stigma. Describing another type of cross cultural difference, a team member reported the case of

a child who had not been in school. During a home visit, it was discovered that the mother was about to send him to back Haiti. It turned out that the student had been experiencing seizures. The first had been in school, from where he had been sent to hospital. After his discharge, the hospital had arranged follow-up visits and none of the four appointments had been by the family. Further investigation revealed that the mother had been worried about unpayable hospital bills that had been received after the initial visit and had decided further visits were unaffordable. Sending the child back to Haiti was also linked with the mother's perception of the child's problem and the solution deemed necessary. A seizure was viewed as possession by evil spirits and a trip back to Haiti would allow for an exorcism. The team member reported that she had spent an evening at the hospital trying to find out what type of treatment was needed by this student and how it could be administered economically.

Unmet goals

Although ultimate outcome of the HOMES project is to increase the academic achievement of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, this goal has not yet been met. Several reasons can be provided for this lack of success. First, during the first two years of the project's implementation, the team depended on data on academic achievement compiled by the school district office. Unfortunately, this data only allowed comparisons between all LEP students and their colleagues who spoke English as a first language. The data could not be disaggregated to track students who had actually been helped by the project from those LEP students who had not participated in any project-based interventions. Hence there have been no discernible patterns in student achievement that could be linked with the project.

A second explanation for the lack of performance related criteria could be that fact that it takes time for the impact of this work to be manifest in significant differences in test scores. Given that academic support currently provided by the project is external to the classroom, the benefits of such services might well be indirect. Furthermore, it is likely that while students are improving in their work, such changes might not necessarily always be manifested in standardized test scores.

A third explanation is related to the use of standardized test scores as a measure of the project's effectiveness. For instance, for a student who was prevented from dropping

out of school, the fact that s/he was present to take the test is an indication of the project's positive impact. The student may well have failed the test, but to the project members, this was better than not being in school at all. Unfortunately, this perspective was not shared by others in the school, who saw this student as bringing down the average grade of all the others.

Following the biennial evaluation of the project, adaptations have been made to better document evidence pertaining to the performance-based outcomes expected of the project. The project has begun its own record keeping and tracking system of the support services provided and the academic achievements of students who have received this support. Ironically, the project team now must expend more time on record keeping rather than spending that time out in the community impacting the lives of more students.

Discussion

A central purpose of this paper was to evaluate the effectiveness of the HOMES project. Ironically, the success of the project could be viewed very differently, depending on the criteria and the lens adopted for such an evaluation. Herein lies a critical dilemma not only for this project but for others that are funded by external grants.

An effective project in the context of immigrant education

From the perspective of the cumulative research in immigrant education the efforts of the project are both successful and important for several reasons. First, few efforts focus on establishing the community-school link, despite the overwhelming evidence to suggest the need for such a link. Furthermore efforts that are studied and documented tend to be centered on solely school-based, academic efforts; systematic study of community-oriented efforts is less common. Another fact that underscores the importance of the project is that the services offered by the team members would not be offered by any other agency. The fact that team members forge community connections that have hitherto not existed, or undertake activities "beyond the call of duty" emphasizes the invaluable resource that project has facilitated within the community.

Perhaps what is most significant among the achievements of the HOMES project is the fact that the team members have achieved all of the process-oriented goals set out

in their grant application and have provided multifaceted services to immigrant children, their families and their teachers. Their visits to the schools provide teachers with an additional source of support when working with students who seem to be having problems. For the students, the team members are an added support especially because they can speak their mother tongue and can understand the experiences and perspectives of immigrants. Each team members works tirelessly, not just visiting three schools each day, but also working thereafter with individual students at tutoring centers, through home visits or in other community contexts. The fact that many of the team members live (or have lived) within the same community as the students might also make a difference.

Another significant impact of the project is the support team members have offered parents and families. The parent workshops conducted in three different languages and the distribution of multilingual information packets about school, cultural mores and other community information have laid the foundation for empowering families within a culture that is both strange and threatening. By being "cultural brokers" between schools and families, the team members are ensuring that the needs of students of immigrant backgrounds and the concerns of their families are being heard by school administrators despite language and cultural barriers that might have precluded such communication in the past.

The achievement of the team members is magnified when considering the context in which they work. They put in a long day's work, yet are available to students and parents even at late hours of the night; their work often makes them unpopular especially with educators who do not want to work with "troublesome" students who are brought back to school; they are "pioneers" in much of what they do, because most have not encountered the problems they do and they have no examples to follow. Yet, they seem to be tireless workers because they realize that if they don't do anything, no one else will.

An ineffective project in the context of academic achievement

Despite the invaluable service rendered by the team members, the project, when viewed from an alternate perspective can be deemed ineffective. As part of the grant application of the HOMES project, the director committed to demonstrate the project's

success through increases in students' standardized test scores. Such an outcome seemed to be logical, given the fact that the services provided through the project were, ultimately, linked to educational achievement. The goal of the project members was to help the students to get to school, stay in school and do well in school. However, as discussed previously, this final goal was not always possible. Consequently, the lack of such evidence could render the project unsuccessful and unworthy of further financial support.

This perspective is significant because it is the one adopted by the federal agency that has hitherto funded the project. This perceived "failure" yields several implications for project implementation and evaluation that must be considered. The first issue is the use of students' standardized test scores as a measure of the project's effectiveness. While it must be acknowledged that this criterion was also included in the original grant application, the fact is that this project would not have been funded had such a clause not been included. The difficulty of using this as a criterion has already been discussed. Consequently, relevant modifications to the data collection process of the project have been implemented, so as to better track the academic achievement of the students who have been helped, and to conduct more valid grade comparisons between diverse student groups.

A second related issue is the lack of alternate measures of effectiveness accepted by granting agencies and the general public. The sole reliance on quantitative data (such as test scores) preclude the use of qualitative descriptive evidence of a project's success. There clearly is a need for alternate evaluation paradigms with clearly specified guidelines to be developed so that a more complete (and therefore, accurate) evaluation of such projects can be conducted. While this paper was written with the purpose of providing an alternate depiction of the achievements of this project, it is relying on the dialogue generated by it to begin to lay the groundwork for suitable alternative evaluation.

A third concern with the use of students' grades as a criterion of evaluation is the fact that the HOMES project does not include any class-based activity. The project is primarily geared to build up a support system between the home and school and to bridge any potential cultural gaps that exist between students' families and their educators. It wouldn't be unfair to argue that ultimately, a student's test score depends

on the quality of the instruction received. However, the HOMES team does not engage in any direct instruction. Yet, they are held accountable to the same outcomes of many school-based instructional intervention projects. Once again, this illuminates the need for a broader based evaluation approach, especially one that would adequately assess the community impact of such grass-roots efforts such as this.

A final concern with the use of student test scores as a measure of effectiveness is that such a criterion fails to acknowledge the 'success' of drop-out prevention. Ironically, the fact that students are re-enrolled in school as a result of the efforts of the HOMES team members, contributes to a lower average score attained by LEP students. In fact, under this evaluation approach, it would be beneficial to let these students drop out. The project team members remain committed to the belief that drop out prevention is important and will benefit individual students and the community in the long run; yet they acknowledge that any recognition of their efforts in this area highlights a negative rather than a positive impact. Furthermore, the fact that more families understand the US education system and are in a better position to supervise and assist their children goes unrecognized within an evaluation system merely premised on test scores.

As a facet of their ongoing adaptation following their biennial evaluation, the HOMES project has engaged in increased documentation of efforts and in tracking of the students' progress. Ironically, this has dipped into the time that project members would otherwise spend in the field. The need to make sure that they can report their impact in terms of "numbers", has resulted in the project team doing even less work in an attempt to more accurately document it!!

Conclusion

. It was intended that this paper would provide educators a description of a project that could be replicated as well as a description of the challenges encountered by the project team. While the project outcomes underscore the need for genuine commitment to the partnership between the school and the community in the education of immigrant students, the discussion of its challenges highlights the need for a broader paradigm for the evaluation of such community-based efforts. This paper illuminates the struggle of project workers who, on a daily basis, make a significant impact on the community, but are hard pressed to demonstrate to policy makers and administrators that preventing

students from dropping out, piquing a student's interest in college or empowering parents to become advocates in their children's education is noteworthy even if their mean test scores do not increase significantly. It is hoped that this paper will encourage ongoing dialogue on how these dual perspectives can be better addressed in future community projects that are funded through state or federal grants.

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