Utilizing Culture to Improve Communication and School Involvement with Parents from Diverse Backgrounds as a Means to Improve Student Achievements Levels in the United States: A National Focus

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ABSTRACT

School leadership in communicating to parents and students from diverse backgrounds is a problem in education that must be addressed. As the population of the United States is becoming more and more diverse, school administrators must develop new ways to reach their stakeholders. All families must be involved in their children's academic progress in order to make their child successful. In an era of school accountability, school leaders must determine innovative ways to relay vital information and improve the level of school involvement for parents from diverse backgrounds.

Introduction

A student's culture directly influences how he or she learns within a diverse setting. Parents play a strong role in developing expectations for learning through their communication with their child, their educational backgrounds, cultural dress, religious beliefs, and values. Schools, especially urban schools in metropolitan cities, tend to have enormously large, diverse student populations with varied backgrounds. With this population change, school leaders are confronted with the all- important task of discovering new methodologies to better communicate with parents who speak different languages in an effort to promote parental involvement in their child's education.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss key research- based recommendations for school administrators and educators to utilize in overcoming communication barriers with parents of diverse backgrounds. Based on a review of current literature, educators find that parental involvement fosters high academic achievement attainment for their children. However, school leaders and other educators who work in high poverty, highly diversified areas are having a difficult time communicating with parents of different cultural backgrounds. As the nation's demographics are drastically changing within the next decade, school leaders everywhere are confronting this issue. States, such as Texas, California, and Florida, have had to hire more English as a Second Language educators to work with their diverse populations. As a result, school leaders have to create new ways to increase parental involvement in the lives of their students. In an era of high- stakes accountability in schools, it is critical that school leaders be able to find other avenues, such as improving their communication with parents from multicultural backgrounds, in order to continue to set high expectations in schools and offer quality educational programs to all learners.

Definition of Terms

Parental Involvement

According to Greene and Tichenor (2003), parental involvement is defined as participating "in the educational process by enhancing their parenting skills, developing positive communication skills between home and school, volunteering, providing learning opportunities at home, contribute to decisions that affect schooling, and collaborating with the community in support of the school" (p.242).

Communication

Bensman (2000) writes that communication is the cultural interchange between teachers and their students and the experience that parents learn about the school/ classroom culture.

Diverse populations

Bermudez and Marques (1996) demonstrate that diverse populations tend to have the following barriers to school and parent communications:

> …lack of English language skills, lack of understanding of the home- school partnership, lack of understanding the school system, lack of confidence, work interference, negative past experiences with schools, and insensitivity and even hostility. (p. 3)

Student Achievement

Greene and Tichenor (2003) write that according to research by Henderson (1981; 1987) and Henderson and Berla (1994) that "parent involvement not only leads to gains in student achievement; it also increases student graduation rates; improves students' self- esteem, behavior, and motivation; creates a more positive attitude toward school among parents and students; and increases parents' satisfaction with teachers" (p. 242).

Culture

According to Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003), culture is dynamic, situational, and historic. It is not only affected by an individual's ethnicity, but also by historical context, geographic location, gender, generation, age, religion, group memberships, and level of education.

Parental Involvement Fosters Student Success

Davern (2004) argues that "positive connections with families are fundamental to providing high- quality education to children" (p. 28). Parental involvement in schools with diverse populations must be encouraged by school leaders in order to effect change in an era of accountability in the United States. According to Greene and Tichenor (2003), parental involvement is defined as participating "in the educational process by enhancing their parenting skills, developing positive communication skills between home and school, volunteering, providing learning opportunities at home, contribute to decisions that affect schooling, and collaborating with the community in support of the school." Parents have a direct effect on how their child performs in school (p. 242).

Noted researcher Epstein (1992) writes, "students at all levels do better academic work and have more positive school attitudes, higher aspirations and other positive behaviors if they have parents who are aware, knowledgeable, encouraging, and involved" (p. 1141). This statement holds great impetus for school leaders. Strong academic success among students from diverse backgrounds can be accentuated through open parent- school communication channels. Greene and Tichenor (2003) write that according to research by Henderson (1981; 1987) and Henderson and Berla (1994) that "parent involvement not only leads to gains in student achievement; it also increases student graduation rates; improves students' self- esteem, behavior, and motivation; creates a more positive attitude toward school among parents and students; and increases parents' satisfaction with teachers" (p. 242). By developing lines of communication, school leaders can find positive, influential levels of support from parents of diverse heritage.

Zygmunt- Fillwalk (2006) believes that "as we call to advance the quality of education, the opportunities to afforded to students, families, and educators to work collaboratively will be a distinct measure of our success" (p. 226 F). It is with this partnership that learning for students from diverse backgrounds can be authenticated and enriched. This must be the goal of school leaders trying to better improve parental communication and involvement at their campuses.

The Impact of School Culture on Student Academic Success

According to Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003), culture is dynamic, situational, and historic. It is not only affected by an individual's ethnicity, but also by historical context, geographic location, gender, generation, age, religion, group memberships, and level of education. Culture influences the achievement levels of diverse students. Bensman (2000) gives credence to the notion that cultural interchanges within the school setting and parental consciousness outside of the classroom provide the way to facilitate student success.

Parents from diverse backgrounds often have challenges they have to confront prior to adequately communicating with school leaders and staff. Bermudez and Marques (1996) points out the barriers to school and parent communications rely upon a multitude of barriers. They include the following:

...lack of English language skills, lack of understanding of the home- school partnership, lack of understanding the school system, lack of confidence, work interference, negative past experiences with schools, and insensitivity and even hostility. (p. 3)

As a result, positive predictors for students' social adjustment and academic achievement, based on the findings by Reynolds, Mavrogenes, Hagemann, and Bezruczko, 1993), coincide with parents' level of satisfaction and comfort with the school their child attends and their expectations for their child's academic achievement.

Recommendations to Overcome Barriers when Working with Parents of Diverse Backgrounds

Halsey (2005) emphasizes that "schools should have a plan for communicating with parents" (p. 57). This is especially true for parents from diverse backgrounds. Boethel (2003) suggests that schools must incorporate the following six strategies for administrators who work with students and parents from diverse populations:

1) welcome family members to the school to encourage positive interactions; 2) meet with families away from the physical school campus; 3) contact parents consistently on a standardized schedule once initial contact has been made; 4) utilize multiple forms of communication in multiple languages; 5) rely upon a multitude of volunteers, not just a select group; and 6) talk to parents of diverse backgrounds about what they believe about student learning on their campuses.

Additionally, to open the lines of communication between parents and the schools their child attends, school leaders must, based on the research performed by Ouellette, Briscoe, and Tyson (2004), provide flexible meeting times for working parents and have teachers highlight the academic and behavioral successes of their child on a regular basis. The study emphasizes more face- to face communication with school representatives for serious offenses and more of an aggressive approach to deal with their child's difficulty in classes early in the grading cycle. Moreover, parents would also like teachers to provide clear communication on the purpose of some types of homework given to their child. They do not want to be contacted at their place of employment.

The overarching message garnered from researchers Esler, Godbar, and Christenson, (2002) and Henderson and Berta (1994) indicate that educators that welcome the parents of their students and value their support tend to have students who succeed well in school. These students have higher grades, higher test scores, higher school engagement, fewer discipline and behavioral problems, and lower dropout rates. There are also benefits for the parents from diverse backgrounds themselves. Bensmen (2000) states that two- communication between parents and school employees are essential for building mutual trust and respect. It provides an opportunity for parents of diverse backgrounds to tell teachers what they specifically know about their child, their

community, and their culture. This broadens the context in which the teacher or school leader may approach the student.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, school leaders can best address the lack of communication between schools and parents and students of diverse backgrounds by developing protocols for stakeholders and parents to initiate consistent positive communication channels. Wright and Stegelin (2003) identify that schools can "become the agents who help children build bridges between the cultures of the family and other communities, by means of practices that respect and respond to the diversity of families" (p.5). Bensmen (2000) argues that teachers and school staff must be recognizant of the fact that learning environments for students from diverse background that are conducive to learning must be gained through an understanding of students' and parents' values, beliefs, and practices of their individual culture. By adhering to these recommendations, school leaders will be more apt to facilitate the communication process with parents of diverse backgrounds. This will aide in improving parental involvement and student achievement across the United States.

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