Involved Minority Parents Enhance the Quality of Elementary School Programs in a Diverse Community

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Introduction

Parental involvement in schools is best considered a partnership between school personnel and parents that promotes the growth of children (Marschall, Shah, & Donato, 2012). Research has shown that parental involvement in schools that have a large minority student body is lower than it is in predominately White, non-Hispanic, middle-class schools, where parents tend to be more actively engaged in school activities (Christianakis, 2011).

It has further been demonstrated that poor and minority parents may come to feel isolated, ignored, and unwelcomed in schools. They may also have long work hours, hold multiple jobs, and have other family responsibilities that conflict with school or meeting hours (Christianakis, 2011; Cooper & Christie, 2005).

Turney and Kao (2009) studied the barriers to school involvement and discovered that, among immigrant parents, time in the United States and English-language ability were positively associated with involvement. They found that minority immigrant parents perceived a greater number of barriers to getting involved in their children's elementary school than did native-born White, non-Hispanic parents. They also found that teachers may interpret the levels of parental involvement at school by minority parents as an indicator of the extent to which parents care about their children's educational outcomes.

Minority and immigrant children may be penalized by teachers who interpret the lower levels of school participation on the part of their parents as a sign that these parents are less interested and less engaged with their children's educational progress (Turney & Kao, 2009).This is just one way that teachers take a deficit view of minority parents (Lasky & Karge, 2011).

Teachers also tend to hold the belief that students fail in school because their families are characteristically flawed (Valencia & Black, 2002). On the contrary, Lasky and Karge (2011) found that immigrant parents typically place a high value on education, yet this may not be enough to generate meaningful parental involvement.

Language barriers and opportunities to learn English may also be among the obstacles to parental involvement, as it is often difficult for immigrant parents and teachers to effectively communicate with one another, both orally and in written form (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990).

Collaborative involvement infers that parents will be kept informed, knowledgeable, and encouraged to participate in their children's schools and education and that the educational processes are congruent with their family cultures and values (Lasky & Karge, 2011). Parents who have the sense that the school's faculty and administration truly want to establish collaboration will become involved as the school demonstrates its awareness of how the community culture influences the children and their families.

Marschall et al. (2012) found that there was a strong association between the presence of minority principals (i.e., Latino and African American) and parental involvement. They proposed that this was due to principals of Color taking a more active role in addressing the needs of immigrant and minority parents. rated having a greater understanding of the situations parents who are unfamiliar with school practices and customs face, such as the difficulty for such parents of attending school programs during the day or reviewing and signing report cards.

LaRocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) found that cultural issues often arise in schools because of poor understanding between educators and families of different cultures. These issues range from differences in the concept of personal space to the perception of authority figures. Many students perform better in learning environments in which they believe that their teachers welcome and value their cultures (Ramirez & Soto-Hinman, 2009).

Schools often tend to be conceptualized as female-dominated spaces in which fathers become invisible. Research about the role that fathers play in a child's academic life has suggested that positive father involvement contributes to increased cognitive competence, empathy, self-efficacy, fewer behavioral problems, and overall school performance (Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & Mcroy, 2014).

Reports about the way in which the home and school cooperate come primarily from mothers, who are most involved in school activities, including volunteering and attending Parent–Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings. More support for father involvement is thus recommended.

Models of Parental Involvement

The Hoover-Dempsey model (Reynolds et al., 2014) describes three main categories that explain parent behavior:

1. *Psychological motivators*: These include how parents think about the part they play in their children's education. This aspect of the model emphasizes parents' beliefs and actions regarding involvement. Research has shown that parents' perceptions and expectations of involvement are closely related with race and ethnicity (Biddle, 1986). If parents feel that they can have a positive influence on student outcomes,

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they are more apt to become involved (Bandura, 1977).

2. *Contextual motivators*: These involve direct requests on behalf of teachers and students for parents to participate and are a predictor of parental involvement and enhance partnership relations (Lavenda, 2011). Specific invitations from the teachers are the strongest indicators of parental school involvement (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2011) and are strongly encouraged.

3. *Life-context variables*: These involve parent time, resources, skills, and knowledge (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Studies have demonstrated that long work hours, the holding of multiple jobs, and other family responsibilities conflict with the hours that schools make available for parental involvement (Christianakis, 2011). Parents may not have sophisticated knowledge or skills, but the development of a community-based, ground-up, bilingual parental involvement program is instrumental in encouraging a sense of belonging in the school.

The Epstein model of parental involvement (Lasky & Karge, 2011; Marschall et al., 2012) offers the following characteristics:

1. Parenting is needed to encourage and support learning at home.

2. Communication is necessary between school and home.

3. Volunteering is an important aspect that includes recruiting and training parents to work in the schools.

4. This aspect involves training parents to create learning environments at home to be able to assist children with homework.

5. Involving parents in decision-making in school governance, such as the PTO, and on school committees enhances a parental involvement program.

6. Community collaboration activities are designed to coordinate resources and work with civic organizations and businesses to strengthen school activities and learning.

The Epstein model assumes that parents have the time, skills, and will to partner with teachers who have the assumption that parents want to change their home environments to mirror school practices (Marschall et al., 2012). Teachers are happy with this model, because their assumptions and views of what is appropriate parental involvement behavior draw from middle-class values related to volunteerism (Christopher, 1996). This model may be unrealistic in schools where a large minority population is represented.

Also relevant are parent empowerment models which aim to improve parental involvement by seeking to minimize school power through anticipating misunderstandings and building on children's home cultures to help parents participate in school decision-making. In this way, not only are parents asked to collaborate in meeting the school's needs, but it also defines their community needs as stakeholders shaping school practices, policies, and pedagogies (Sheldon, 2002). These models require a high degree of social interaction and networking.

School Personnel Involvement

Culture brokers are an interesting aspect of parental involvement described by Marschall et al. (2012). Culture brokers are defined "as school personnel who have important connections to their racial or ethnic origin groups whether through mutual history or shared sociocultural experiences" (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). They are often teachers of Color, but they do not need to be, as it can also involve shared religion, country of origin, or other culturally relevant characteristics that bring them together. The presence of culture brokers in the school may foster supportive relations and lead more parents to become involved.

Studies have shown that cultural connection between teachers, such as Latino or Asian teachers, and students has positive effects on minority student achievement, including reductions in dropout rates and disciplinary action, and may increase college attendance (Meier & England, 1984). Teachers of color may be better equipped at recognizing and addressing cultural differences that are indicated in parental attitudes and behaviors that might otherwise be interpreted as disengagement, disinterest, or indifference (Loder-Jackson, McKnight, Brooks, McGrew, & Voltz, 2007; Ramirez, 2003).

Ramirez (2003) described how Latino parents felt disrespected and culturally misunderstood by predominately White, non-Spanish-speaking teachers who concluded, erroneously, that the parents' status and unfamiliarity with U.S. school traditions signified their parental lack of care. African-American parents felt that educators labeled them as being problematic and uncaring because they did not participate in school activities (Cooper, 2007). Findings have shown that teachers who do not share linguistic or racial/ethnic backgrounds with their students can function in ways similar to culture brokers as a result of enhanced education, training, and professional development based on issues of culture, language, and immigration (Marrow, 2009).

Ideas for Enhancing Parental Involvement

Communication

Communication with parents includes sharing information about school programs and opportunities to volunteer as well as children's academic progress. This communication has been considered critical to student achievement (Baker, 1997; Marschall et al., 2012). This form of outreach is especially important for racial-minority and language-minority parents, and it is particularly important that communication be provided in numerous languages.

Participation in school events is an important aspect of parental involvement (i.e., attending PTO meetings and open houses or volunteering in the classroom). Another feature of parental involvement concerns the role of the parent in the household relative to school affairs.

Parents who are involved in assisting with and supervising homework and other school-related tasks, such as reading to children and talking with them about academic issues, are part of a process that promotes student achievement (Marschall et al., 2012). Parents want to hear from teachers with positive examples of their children's achievement, not just about deficits (Reynolds et al., 2014).

Parents and teachers agree that a close connection between them depends on the support for bilingual communication with and assistance for parents in the home. Support must also be provided for teachers who are monolingual (Reynolds et al., 2014). School communications are typically written at a high level of English to comply with legal requirements. Therefore these documents are more formal and less clear to parents who have not mastered the English language.

Parents may be unaware of the programs that are available to their children because they cannot comprehend the announcements that are sent home from the school. This is particularly true if a child needs special assistance in school because of physical or learning disabilities.

The language of documents should reflect the manner of speaking and be at an academic level that is familiar to parents who may not have much experience with formal education or the English language

(Waterman, 2003). Documents that are distributed to parents should be reviewed for appropriate language and format to ensure that readers can readily understand the content, especially if it requires an acceptance signature.

Schools must support teachers by providing time and resources for regular communication with parents. Professional development sessions must be provided to encourage critical approaches to race, ethnicity, class, and gender for building relationships. Programs for helping parents to enhance their education or to provide other resources and contacts are important for schools to provide (Reynolds et al., 2014).

Partnerships

Professionals must expend more effort toward seeking family input. This can more easily be accomplished when meetings are scheduled at convenient times in accessible meeting spaces. Regional meetings held in public buildings closer to the homes of a substantial number of parents would cause less hardship for many (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995). Home visits from teachers, principals, assistant principals, and guidance counselors could establish positive relationships with parents, letting them know that the school is not only interested in the child but also cares about the family (Harry et al., 1995).

Successful school partnerships involve educators who perceive the families of minority students as possessing valuable knowledge that is worth sharing with the school community (Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010). Most schools have parent-school partnerships that consist of parents participating in conventional activities, such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and fund-raisers.

However, parents can provide substantially more to the school through mutually building community resources. Exhibitions that provide information about the cultural heritage of the various groups represented in the school will bring valuable new knowledge to those who are unfamiliar with others' customs, including their beliefs, social norms, and family rituals, which might include food choices, dress, travel, and relationships.

Together with teachers and students, parents can plan and present song, dance, art, and drama representative of their cultures, including appropriate costumes. Native handcrafts could be displayed and hands-on demonstrations provided. These exciting programs, designed by parents, teachers, and students working together, would provide valuable multicultural experiences for all.

Community gardens are another way for schools to provide school-parent partnerships. If there is land available at the school, parents, teachers, and students can work together to learn more about the environment, the various vegetables and fruits that are part of represented cultures, and dishes that can be prepared by using the fruits of their labor, as well as to teach and learn a new vocabulary. Teachers could invite parents into the classroom to prepare various indigenous foods for the children to taste.

Storytelling

Children love to write stories. Younger children do not always have the skills for doing so but could easily dictate a story into a tape recorder or onto a computer. Children who are non-English speakers could tell their stories in their native languages; the translations would then be enjoyed by English speakers. Bilingual parents could translate the stories told in English into their native languages so they could be enjoyed by learners who are not yet proficient in English. This type of classroom assistance utilizes parental skills and expertise and, at the same time, gives the parent an opportunity to be part of the learning process.

There are certainly topics that parents are interested in hearing more about; some parents might be willing to facilitate groups that would educate others about the culture of the school. For example, sessions, with daycare, could be provided for Spanish-speaking mothers, facilitated by one of them, with a topic of interest and concern regarding the school, learning process, or parenting.

Similar types of programs could be initiated for other non-English-speaking groups using the same format. Evening sessions for non-English speakers could also be arranged so that working parents and extended families could attend. This type of session could be held at off-campus sites, closer to the parents' residences. Parents who are willing to share their homes could invite several other parents and their children's teachers for an evening coffee to talk about their concerns, outside of the school building, in a more informal setting.

Non-English-speaking parents of children with disabilities may have additional difficulties understanding the laws and opportunities available to them and their children. It would be helpful to provide their own session with the teachers, with an interpreter, so they could become more familiar with services available to their children. The Individualized Educational Plan could be reviewed, questions could be answered, and individual concerns could be addressed. A session of this type would help parents advocate more easily for their children, as they would more clearly understand what types of services their children could receive from the school.

A bilingual-parent newsletter is another potential idea for parental involvement. Information could be provided by school personnel, but the actual production of the newsletter could be done in the home of a parent or those of several parents and could involve their bilingual children. This newsletter would provide information about meetings, events, and items of community interest to families. It could be distributed online and/or sent home with students. It might be published four times each school year.

Conclusion

Throughout her book *Culture and Power in the Classroom*, Antonia Darder (2012) wrote about the "culture of democracy" and the manner in which schools are responsible not only for teaching the basic skills but also for preparing all students for a world of diversity and multiculturalism. A leadership plan for parental involvement must be built around the theory of community practice (Cooper et al., 2010). This practice comes out of social theories that describe learning as a communal and participatory process. The concepts are in direct relationship to Darder's critical bicultural pedagogy.

A community of practice is one in which people of color can engage in deep awareness and understanding of social issues and their implications for all learning environments. In these communities, parents, teachers, administrators, and students work together to engage in thoughtful and purposeful action to create social change. Together, their voices are stronger. Learning is facilitated through communication exchange; parents play an important role in curriculum development, and they share, in many ways, the delivery of that curriculum by participating in dialogue and teaching.

Together with teachers and students, communities of practice co-construct new knowledge and develop a repertoire of activities and stories (Lave & Wenger,

1991). A community of practice creates a welcoming climate for parents and children, promotes effective communication, and raises cultural awareness.

This action begins in the front office, extends throughout the school, and involves effective written and oral communication. The inclusion of all cultures in school-related events is evident through the celebration of different cultures, the display of culturally diverse student work throughout the school, and the presence of bilingualism in the classroom.

Transformative leadership (Shields, 2010) in the schools involves leaders who identify changes and create visions that guide and help students, staff, and parents to gain awareness of inequities in race, class, gender, and other issues and then work together in a community for a more democratic and socially just society.

By doing so, parents, students, and staff deconstruct practices that perpetuate the privilege of some to the exclusion of others (Shields, 2010): "Indeed, they act courageously and continuously to ensure more equitable learning environments and pedagogical practices for all children" (p. 584). Parents' inclusion is imperative for achieving their goals.

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