Maneuvering the Road of Education & Administrators

Reflections as a Teacher & Researcher

A. Y. "Fred" Ramirez

Introduction

It's been a while since I wrote about schools and their relationships with families. Early in my career, I wrote extensively on the family–school dynamic. Why? When I began teaching, my concern was creating a different school experience for my students than what I had endured as a high school student. As a result, school–home strategies created strong parent communication, while student academic success increased at the Catholic high school in Santa Barbara, California, where I taught.

While my aim as an educator was to rethink school–home relations based on my recollections as a student, I came to realize within the first week of teaching that administrators regarded parents merely as financial contributors for the school and disciplinarians of their children when teachers or administrators would phone home. Therefore how would I, a first-year teacher, be able to navigate the road of families and schools?

Method

Before embarking on describing my journey of seeking to establish relationships with administrators and families, I first wish to share that this article will take an autobiographical narrative approach or "restorying" perspective of research collected throughout several years of teaching, writing, interviewing families, working with administrators; and observing within K–12 schools.

The autobiographical analysis is establishing a rich tradition in research as scholars are moving more towards qualitative research as they use such forms to share stories and narratives for retelling, social justice, lifelong learning, and educational practice (Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003; Walker, 2017). With this in mind, I will continue the narrative.

Working With Families

During my first couple of weeks as a new teacher, I sought to create an atmosphere of inclusion in which parents felt they were part of the process in their child's education. Why? My experiences as a K–12 student were fraught with negativity from both teachers and administrators. There were many events I experienced as a student with a speech impediment that festered and created a person who wished not to participate in schooling.

For this reason, teachers characterized me as angry, disobedient, and disrespectful, for I wouldn't answer questions, and I was told that "people like you will never amount to anything," "you'll be lucky to graduate elementary school," and "you are not living up to your potential."

The first week of my first teaching position, I was told negative things from administrators and teachers regarding students and families during our teacher in-services. Not only did they comment about the junior class but they also mentioned specific students. Without knowing, they spoke about a cousin of mine in unflattering terms.

How was I going to make a positive experience for the students after this? I made favorable phone calls home for each student during the first two weeks of school, with a follow-up when a student improved or did something positive. Having 160+ students did take time, but I limited my conversation by introducing who I was, the course I taught, and that I was looking forward to teaching their child.

The results were amazing. Just by communicating positively with families throughout the first semester, student academic achievement increased, students were self-monitoring disciplinary issues within the classrooms, and when parents needed a call for something negative, the parents were more willing to speak with me, as opposed to being "argumentative," which was the norm experienced by my teacher colleagues.

The vice principal called me into her office to let me know she wasn't hearing anything about me from the students. As she put it, "This worries me, for students always comment on first-year teachers. Have you threatened them in any way?" I merely shared, "They trust me, for I trust and respect them."

Typically there was distrust among students, teachers, and administrators within this school, and the students often shared with me how they felt the administration did not "care" about them as people. There were numerous items communicated

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during faculty meetings about particular groups of students who were being singled out due to their style of dress, taste in music, and gender. As I continued to work with families from this private Catholic school, an opportunity arose to obtain a master's in education, where I began to formalize my studies on school–home relationships.

First Examination of Research

To my surprise, there was a substantial amount of research in the area of families and their relationships with elementary schools but limited research about secondary institutions.

After reviewing the research that was available, I continued with my strategies, much to the dismay of faculty and administrators at the Catholic school. One particular teacher felt attacked, for students were asking her to contact their parents. I left this school and began work within an urban district in Los Angeles, California, where I continued my practices with students and their families.

While keeping in mind the research on families and schools, I began gathering phone numbers and made calls home. Parents were at first worried when I told them who I was but then thanked me for calling. When teachers found out what I was doing, they questioned why I was calling parents. The teacher union representative visited me during my preparation period and shared that calling parents was "above and beyond" what the teacher contract stipulated.

An administrator also called my practice into question by asking what I "hoped to accomplish" by contacting families. When I shared the achievements of the students from the Catholic high school (a range of low to high socioeconomic students), the research I had conducted, and the positive responses I had received from parents, the administrator shared that I "should not expect" similar results due to the "nature" of my students (low socioeconomic, 95% Latino, high second language learner population).

I was told, in not so many words, that urban families may "not care" as much as the Catholic school families did about education. While I wished to intervene and counter her argument, I refrained due to being a new teacher on campus.

Ultimately and unfortunately, I found the same antagonism from teachers and administrators in both the private Catholic school and the urban public school regarding family involvement, specifically regarding my efforts to create parent/family allies within my classrooms as a way to foster student academic achievement.

Nevertheless, I continued to engage families, and by doing so, I began to understand the school community, with parents working nights or double shifts, the number of single-parent families, nontraditional families, homeless students, language and cultural differences, and many parents finding it difficult to be home during "regular" school hours.

What wasn't different were the attitudes of parents toward their children's schooling. Parents from the Catholic high school and the public school both desired their children to do well academically but didn't know "how" to assist or be involved in their child's education.

Putting Passion Into Action

After gaining the trust of students and parents, and realizing that many of the students had not been to a university, I began to take three interested students each week with me to my master's courses. During the car rides to and from the school, I found out some valuable information from the students:

- Many students had never been outside of the general vicinity of their town (the university was approximately 30 miles one way from their school).
- Students had never been to a college or university.
- The junior students didn't know how to apply to a 4-year university or 2-year junior college.

When we arrived at the university, we would drive around to let them visually see the vastness of the campus, then grab a meal in the cafeteria (on a teacher's salary), have them meet with a librarian to conduct research assignments for my class, and finally they would visit my class. Fortunately, I had cleared these classroom visits with my professors, who took the time to welcome and include my students in the class activities.

One time, a senior who was in my junior history class came with me to Loyola Marymount University. Some would consider him a "gang member" because of his style of dress, the way he spoke, and those with whom he hung out. After our visit, he came to my office the following day and asked if I would help him fill out his junior college application. Other students wished to continue their formal education at a four-year school, while most wanted to try the junior college route. My teacher colleagues became upset with me when they received word of these trips, for they felt it made them "look bad." Administrators again questioned my motives and what I had hoped to gain from taking students to a university, and yet parents were grateful.

Committee Work, Committee Lessons

I then volunteered to be part of the school's Title I committee based on the research I had conducted on education policy and family involvement. During the first meeting, which began at 3:20 P.M., I asked where the parents were, for they needed to be part of the Title 1 committee. The administrator shared that "communication" was sent home regarding the meetings and showed me a flyer that was given to students, in English, to the parents.

She then stated, "All we need to do is state in our document that parents knew about the meetings, and place it in our Title I folder." When I shared what I was learning from our parents and their schedules, the lack of transportation, the English barrier in reading the flyer, the administrator again shared that all that was needed was an agenda to be placed in the Title I folder.

There seemed to be the same attitude toward parents/families here as there had been at the Catholic school: that parents were people to deal with and not to partner with. The negativity was abundantly clear during the one time teachers were to meet with families, at Back to School Night.

Back to School Night

The one time we were able to meet with families came during Back to School Night. Administrators asked teachers to try to bring parents to campus but to limit their communication with them and to only go through the course syllabus. Back to School Night at the public school was quite a departure from the private school at which I taught, for the principal at the Catholic high school told parents Back to School Night was the time they would pick up their children's grade reports. If the parents did not attend, they would not receive their child's grades.

When the parents arrived at the public school Back to School Night, many had their child's schedule and would move from class to class to hear each teacher for eight minutes. The Back to School Night was scheduled at the same time as at the

Catholic school, on a Wednesday night at 7:00 P.M.. Many of my families at the public school did not attend Back to School Night, for they worked at night, while some didn't have transportation (most of our students arrived on buses), and other parents did not feel comfortable coming to school. I learned this due to my early conversations with families and would meet them off-campus when they wished to meet face-to-face.

After the last period at Back to School Night was over, an announcement came over the speakers that there would be a faculty meeting in the cafeteria and all teachers were asked to report. The problem with this was that there was never a meeting. The administrators simply wished to have the parents leave campus and not allow them to speak with teachers. One colleague exclaimed, "Back to School Night is just a dog and pony show to let parents think we care."

During the next Title I meeting, I made two suggestions to increase parent participation at our Back to School Night: The first was to use Title I funds to send buses to pick up parents for the event, and the second was to try to change the day and time to accommodate the parents better. The administrators blocked both suggestions due to the "inconvenience" of having more people on campus and "redesigning" the school calendar.

When asked when the administrators made the schedule, they responded with anger that the school calendar was not to be a topic of discussion and families would "just need to make it." During this meeting, another teacher voiced concern that she was unable to speak with her families whose children had special needs due to the time allotted (eight minutes). In response, the administrator rose and said that the Title I meeting was over.

Meetings and Administration

As a teacher, I found myself in contention with colleagues and administrators, because I would arrive early to school and stay late to meet with parents and students. Through communicating with families, I realized most parents were not salaried workers who might be able to take off work to meet during the school day, nor were they stay-at-home parents. Most of the families I worked with were hourly wage earners, and taking time off their job was an inconvenience as well as a loss of crucial income.

During my tenure as a teacher, all of the 504 Education Plans and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, along with any disciplinary gatherings with parents, were held during the school day at both the Catholic and public schools.

Administrators shared that they didn't wish to ask the teachers to come early in the morning or after school due to their teaching contracts. Substitute teachers were not a viable option for teachers "due to cost," and one administrator shared that parents needed to meet with teachers during school hours if they "cared" about their children.

Unfortunately, many teachers would never attend the 504 or the IEP meetings. Thus parents would abandon their work schedule, arrive on campus, and not be able to discuss their child with the teachers. Administrators would often give excuses for the teachers not being present and try to answer questions the parents might have concerning specific classes. Following are examples of some of the meetings that I attended.

When asked to attend a disciplinary meeting at the private school, I arrived late due to a substitute teacher's late arrival to monitor my class. When I opened the conference room door, the parents and student looked dejected. The principal seemed to smile when he addressed me as I walked in, saying, "Ah, good, Mr. Ramirez is here. Mr. Ramirez, we all spoke concerning Mark. What do you wish to contribute?"

I smiled as I rounded the table to the empty chair and said,

> Mark? Mark is great! I love Mark! Yes, he could be a little unmotivated, and I may need to speak to him from time to time, but Mark is great. I believe if he put in the effort he would reach his potential of being an outstanding student.

I sat down, smiled and both the parents, and Mark looked at me as if to say thank you. The principal glared at me.

After the meeting, I had a heart-to-heart with Mark and shared that I went out on a limb for him, and what I said I believed. He turned himself around after that meeting and performed better than expected.

The other incident involved an IEP meeting for a student at the public school. The parents were not present, and I asked if we were going to wait. The administrator said no, because a letter was sent with the student to give to the parents as to when the meeting was going to take place. The IEP went forward without the parents, and I was asked to sign the document at the end of the session. I responded that I wouldn't sign, for the parents were not present to contribute to the accommodations for their child. The administrator then signed the parents' names, and I was asked to leave.

There were other negative occurrences that I witnessed as a teacher reflecting attitudes of both administrators and teachers toward parents. That isn't to say these were all bad. One colleague of mine asked for the parents of a student to go to his classroom before the scheduled IEP meeting. The parents did, and the teacher gave the parents three manila folders with papers in them.

When the parents asked what they were for, the teacher shared, "Just walk in with these, and tell the administrators what you want for your child." The parents reported back to the teacher that when they arrived with the folders, the administrator in charge looked at the folders, looked at the parents, and gave the parents what they wished after telling the parents previously they were not eligible for the same accommodations.

The contents within the folders were just blank paper. The teacher knew that the mere visual perception of parents having information would scare the administrators into supporting the parents' demands. This teacher knew how to manipulate the administrators and became an advocate for the parents and the students. These experiences assisted in the shaping of my research path as I continued my studies about families and schools.

Graduate Education and Family Research

As a doctoral student, I began to substitute teach in a local school district to earn some extra funds. I found many of the same attitudes toward families that I had previously observed in California. I remember a particular conversation with administrators and teachers at one high school during harvest season, when farmers in the area needed to bring in their corn or soybeans for processing. These educational professionals complained that students would take three-to-five days off to help their parents.

Being from California, "harvest" was a new term, but I asked, "If I understand what you are saying, if students do not assist their parents on the farm, the corn will die. Thus the family would lose money for the entire year?" The administrator speaking with us shared, "You don't understand. They need to be in school."

Could it be the administrator wanted the students in school for funding reasons, and not for concern over the students' education or family needs? Some teachers provided opportunities to make up work without sharing this with administrators, whereas most of the teachers gave failing grades to the students who missed school because they needed to help at home.

After I had conducted my dissertation research I spoke with administrators at the other high school (there were two high schools in the town) to get feedback about the teachers' attitudes toward parents. It seemed as if I were talking to people from two different centuries. One administrator stated, "All hell broke loose in education when we took the bolts off the desks." He wanted teachers to be in front of the class, lecturing, without any understanding about differentiated instruction.

The principal I spoke with was different. When I shared with him that his teachers did not believe in communicating with families in positive ways, and believed as high school teachers that they should not concern themselves with parents, the award-winning principal looked at me with displeasure and said, "Come with me." As we walked together on his campus of close to 2,500 students, he shared, "Pick out any student. Just pick them out."

I pointed to one as we were walking, and the principal said, "Hi, Jerry. How are you doing? How is your mom? I heard she was ill? Give her my best." Jerry responded with a "Thank you, Mr. Smith," and we kept walking. I pointed to another student, to whom the principal said, "Sally! How are you? Great acting in the musical. I enjoyed your work. Keep it up." We continued this for 10 minutes while making our way back to his office. When we returned, he shared,

> Teachers need to be aware of the lives of their students. When we do, we consider the families. When we do this, we create a community of learners. Not only the students but for ourselves. Thank you for bringing this research to my attention.

The principal of that school took the time to know each of his 2,500 students.

The goal of studying parent involvement was to assist teachers and schools in creating allies with families. My research allowed me to meet with Joyce Epstein from Johns Hopkins University (personal communication, fall 1995), who provided me with much of her research and surveys for my studies.

While I was formulating my dissertation questions, I asked a professor to chair my committee. When he asked what I would be studying (teachers' attitudes toward parents and parental involvement in high schools), he shared, "So, you wish to study the enemy, huh?" My response was, "Yes, and your comment is one of the reasons why."

Teacher Educator/Researcher

After completing my doctorate, I was hired as a professor back in California, where I began writing articles and meeting with school districts and teachers regarding parental involvement. On some high school campuses, my reputation as the "parent guy" became apparent, and teachers questioned why I wished to involve families in education.

After conducting a focus group study in a low economic school district, a parent called my office and shared that she had heard about me from one of her friends who was a part of the research in the community. We met, and she discussed with me her efforts fighting the school district for educational resources for her child (Ramirez, 2005).

In the process of hearing her story, I realized things remained the same for many families. Here was a single mom whose child needed bilingual and special education instruction, and no person in the school district was willing to assist. I made a phone call to the State Department of Education, which followed up by telling the school district that they needed to provide services immediately or be placed on probation.

For Esperanza, the woman whom I assisted, this was a small victory, but it only reinforced my belief that those with people on their side who have resources can obtain what they wish from schools. Esperanza and the lessons I drew from her experience have resonated throughout my career as an advocate for improving school–home relations.

A conversation with the Title I coordinator for a large school district commented to me, "Dr. Ramirez, I would be shocked if any of our schools are in compliance with the parent portion of Title I." As a consultant for K–12 schools, I often open the conversation with teachers and administrators by asking them what ideas, research, or rationale on improving school–home relations they learned during their credential programs. Ninety per cent of the time, these professionals share that they have never experienced how they can enhance parent relations at their school.

Reflection

While many quality administrators involve families, there are others who wish for parents to only be present for fund-raiser events. The issue could be that many teacher and administration courses fail to train future educators about how to treat parents as allies rather than enemies.

At two universities where I have worked, I created master's-level courses on families and schools. During the sessions, many teachers tried school–home strategies and found the parents responded positively. Teachers reported that their classroom management improved, as students began to self-monitor, and discovered that creating home partnerships was worth the effort, because it benefited both the students and themselves as teachers.

Today, I am still involved with school districts through the nonprofit organization that I founded for creating school leadership clubs for students and helping them conduct local and global service projects. I speak with many school administrators who wish to involve families in positive ways but feel constrained by their teachers who are being told by their representatives that calling parents is "above and beyond the call of duty."

Colleagues of mine who are teachers have shared that they "don't get paid" to engage parents, even stating, since they "don't grade homework at home, why should they call families?" Maybe administrators need to find those teachers who wish to make a stand for their families and provide them with guidance and strategies in creating stronger school–home partnerships.

Although there will be teachers who may not want to participate in a simple effort like positive phone calling, if an administrator works with a couple of teachers, at least some of our students and parents will feel connected

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