Do Parents Value Education?
Teachers' Perceptions of Minority Parents

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Individuals who are actively engaged in the life of the student play a crucial role in many aspects of their development and can defined as a student's biological parents, extended family, legal guardians or older siblings. Research has shown that an increase in parent involvement correlates with an increase in student achievement (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Benjet, 1995; Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning, 1995a; Epstein, 1991).

It has been found that communication is the key to successful parent involvement (Burbules 1993; Center on Families 1995; Epstein 1995). Both teachers and parents agree that communication is pivotal to foster and maintain a positive school-home partnership, but, the reality is that each feels that the other party is responsible for initiating communication (Ramirez, 2001).

Although both parties agree that this partnership is important, teachers do not generally follow this school of thought. Attributing "blame" to each other creates a communication barrier between school and home, as such, creating an adversarial atmosphere. When teachers take the initiative to communicate with home, it is usually for negative reasons such as behavioral problems. Even then, teachers contact only 50% of families (Lee, 1994; Ramirez 1999).

There are many factors that constrain parental participation in schools: narrow vision of parental involvement, school personnel's negative proclivity, lack of teacher training, pressing employment issues, and cultural differences (Ramirez, 1999; Yap & Enoki, 1995). Moll's (1992) discussion of culture and language issues offers a view into understanding family

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dynamics which serves as a bridge to the school-home partnership. He emphasizes a "meaning centered model" which utilizes students' first language skills and involves the student's family as a resource for their learning. He asserts that it is imperative that teachers maximize the covert and overt home and community resources of their students.

This approach encourages parents and community members to share their knowledge and skills, such as economic, agricultural, carpentry, mechanics, folk remedies (i.e., funds of knowledge) in the classroom. According to Moll (1992), the families shared knowledge that was available and accessible through social networks of exchange" a strategy encourages teacher as ethnographer.

Historically, research on parent involvement has focused on the elementary level; thus, research is needed at the secondary level. As adolescents progress through the various stages of puberty, they begin to assert their independence while developing their identity. They spend more time with their peers and less time with their parents (Steinberg, 2004).

Therefore, it is essential that the line of communication between teachers and parents are kept open and cultivated. It is imperative that pre-service and in-service teachers examine and consider their own views and beliefs as they relate to issues of cultural diversity (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Delpit, 1995).

The first step in the line of investigation is to examine how teachers view parents and children of diverse cultural groups. Specifically, we explored secondary preservice and inservice teachers' perceptions of diverse cultural groups and the value these parents place on education. We selected pre-service and in-service teachers enrolled in courses in a teacher credentialing program that had cultural diversity concepts embedded within the curricula.

Methodology

Participants

The participants for this study were 160 secondary education preservice and inservice teachers enrolled in education classes. Because our study focused on issues relating to family involvement and cultural diversity, we chose to survey five education courses. Two were multicultural education courses and three were courses that had family involvement strategies, as well as diversity components embedded within the curricula. Of these participants, 91 (57%) were female and 69 (43%) were male. The ethnic distribution of the respondents was 59% majority and 41% minority ethnic groups.

Data Analysis

The participants completed an anonymous attitudinal survey. In order to be sensitive to the diverse nature of students and their families, this survey was theoretically based on the work of researchers who are concerned with issues pertaining to multicultural issues (Banks, 1997; Bennet, 1999; Nieto, 2000). The survey consisted of 17 demographic questions (e.g., experiences and exposure to cultural and linguistic diversity) and 20 items (e.g., multicultural curricular issues, cultural pluralism and social structural equality) answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

As a means to understand the participants' in-depth perceptions and self-reflections, additional open-ended questions were asked. Using a qualitative analysis procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the open-ended part of the survey was coded and categorized, allowing several themes to emerge.

Findings

The findings showed that the majority of participants indicated that their attitudes toward working with diverse

student populations were positively influenced by taking these courses. Many of the participants stated that they experienced an increased awareness, understanding, and appreciation of other cultures. These findings were reflected in both the qualitative and quantitative sections and are illustrated in the following statements.

Vivian said:

I have gained a better vision about multicultural setting in the classroom. I'll be able to deal flexibly with many different cultural issues within a classroom with students from different cultural backgrounds.

Abraham stated,

I feel that I will be more aware of the different perspectives students from different cultures might have.

Another student, Crystal asserted,

I have a better understanding of what minority students may be going through and have realized you must treat each child as an individual.

In addition, we were able to capture the self-awareness that the participants experienced through self-reflection. Some of the respondents realized that they had learned much from these courses, but still had limited, if any, experience with diverse student populations. "I have learned a lot through school [this course] about different cultures, but have actually encountered very few."

Although many of the pre-service teachers' attitudes toward CLD students illustrated acceptance and understanding of CLD populations, our data illustrated some troubling results. The data contained evidence of negative attitudes from pre-service and in-service teachers toward parents of ethnic minority groups. The majority of the participants still exhibited negative perceptions toward the value ethnic minority parents place on education.

The participants continued to believe that the home and the lack of value that parents place on education were responsible for their students' deficient academic achievement. This supports the work by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978), who explained that there exists a myth about black and poor parents.

As stated by Lawrence-Lightfoot, parents, "do not care about the education of their children, are passive and unresponsive to attempts to get them involved, and are ignorant naïve about the intellectual and social needs of their children" (p. 36).

For example, 73% of the respondents disagreed with the survey item "Minority parents from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to place great value on education." In addition, 83% of the participants disagreed with the survey item, "A major reason for the pattern of low academic achievement among poor minorities is the structure and values of schools, *not* the home."

The responses given on the open-ended section of the survey illustrated that some preservice and inservice teachers, due to their limited cultural knowledge and teaching experience, felt ill equipped for teaching culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Their limited exposure and experience in dealing with CLD students was also expressed in the language they used. The statements made by participants set up a dichotomy that focused on the concept of "other."

They also stated a fear of being rejected, due to ethnic differences, by minority students and their parents. As expressed by Ron, "Their parents might not accept me because I don't know about their culture; I might not be able to teach them the right way." Alex articulated similar sentiments; "The students may see me as an "outsider" if I am not the same ethnicity as them."

This added to the notion that the participants possessed a limited cultural knowledge and understanding of diverse populations. The issue of limited experience in dealing with CLD students was evident in the following statement by Sue,

Because I am so 'white' and I will be student teaching in a very diverse school, I feel unprepared. All of my experience has been at a school [that was] 90% white so this makes me a little edgy.

Conclusion and Implications

Based on our analysis of the survey data, we found that taking courses that had cultural diversity concepts embedded within the curricula positively influenced many of the pre-service and in-service teachers' attitudes towards issues of diversity. Because of their limited cultural knowledge, teaching experience and exposure to issues of diversity, some participants still felt ill equipped for teaching CLD students.

A disarming finding was that the majority of preservice and inservice teachers continue to blame the home environment and the parents' lack of value toward education for CLD students' low academic performance. It is a difficult task, for an

educator, to teach about the effects of racism when students maintain the attitude that the parents are responsible for these deficiencies, therefore, negating the presence of societal racism.

As illustrated in the responses of the participants, they blame the home and parents for CLD students' low academic performance. As long as this rift between home and school exist, communication between parents and teachers will continued to be strained and hindered. As implied by Ramirez's (1991) study, a lack of communication may result in negative attitudes between the teachers and parents.

In order to initiate communication, both parents and teachers must hold a healthy respect for each other. This should include a respect for cultural differences as well as the home environment of their students. Assumptions should not be made by any party involved in the home-school partnership.

These findings led us to examine our program and suggest programmatic changes. We ascertained from the data that one multicultural education class is essential but not sufficient. As such, we propose that issues related to diversity should be infused throughout all of the courses offered in our teacher education program.

We ascertained from the data that embedding issues related to multicultural education across the curriculum is essential. Our recommendations for program revision in teacher education call for the inclusion of field experiences that include community outreach programs with CLD populations, in addition to courses taken at the university. We suggest that these revisions are implemented before pre-service teachers engage in their student teaching assignment, therefore, they will be better equipped to adequately communicate with parents and teach and meet the needs of CLD students.

Based upon these recommendations, programmatic changes were made. A graduate class for inservice teachers that focuses solely on family issues was created. The instructor for this course is an expert on family issues. This is pertinent information, not only for inservice teachers, but also for preservice teachers. Therefore, we have also infused into each of our existing courses for preservice teachers issues focusing on family and diversity.

Theses changes were based upon information gathered as a result of this study. We found that students, even at the onset of the credential program, in the context of

their first education courses, were infusing terminology into their discourse which pitted parents against teachers. This dialogue set up a negative dichotomy which situated parents as "other" as well as "parents against teachers."

Because of this phenomenon, we infused concepts into our credential courses which emphasized parents as allies, as opposed to adversaries, in the education of their children. We include strategies that encourage teachers to get to know their student and parent population better by going to community events, interviewing community and family members and inviting parents to share their "funds of knowledge." This strategy encourages teacher as ethnographer and is an excellent approach to encouraging family involvement in the school.

We also invite experts in the field to speak to our students about family-school-community involvement. Specifically, these experts speak about practical applications and strategies that teachers can use in their classrooms on how to encourage parental involvement in schools. This includes our resident expert on family, as well as invited speakers from the local districts.

We found that this was an important change to implement in our program. If students have the mindset of parent as "other," no matter what concept is taught, they will conceptualize and frame the new information based upon their tainted perceptions of parents. Therefore, it is crucial for us, as teacher educators to create positive perceptual views of parents for students from the onset of their credential program.

By understanding the attitudes and perceptions of preservice and inservice teachers, and appropriate curriculum and program reform, we hope to provide future candidates with a better understanding of issues and pedagogy relevant to improving the home-school partnership.

Hopefully, these changes, by taking into account the needs and resources of culturally and linguistically diverse populations will lead to improved relations among home, schools, and the surrounding communities, culminating in better educational experiences for all.

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