Can Special Education Teachers Create Parent Partnership with Mexican American Families? ¡Si Se Pueda!

Loretta Salas, Eric J. Lopez, Kathleen Chinn, & Eva Menchaca-Lopez

Introduction

Creating partnership between special educators and parents who are Mexican American often poses unique challenges for all involved. Historically, the fact that these parents may not share mainstream values, traditions, and customs has often been perceived by special education teachers as part of the problem and not as valuable new sources of information. This view has also been associated to other families who come from low socio-economic backgrounds, limited English proficiency, and/or racial and ethnic minorities, often leading to an eradication of the parent-special education teacher partnership.

Mexican American parents have been underrepresented in school-related decision-making and other traditional schooling activities (Lian & Fontanez, 2001; Peña, 1999). We believe that in order for effective partnerships to take place with these parents special education teachers must go beyond creating comfortable and welcoming environments.

Although creating these environments are necessary and a good starting point, the call for true partnerships requires that special education teachers come to know the cultural aspect surrounding how these parents perceive schooling. In addition, expanded parental involvement as suggested by the law requires that special educators learn: how parents from diverse background affect student learning; how to include all parents from diverse backgrounds; and how to minimize barriers between schools and these communities.

This article explores good practices in creating parent partnerships between special education teachers and Mexican American families.

Loretta Salas, Eric J. Lopez, Kathleen Chinn, and Eva Menchaca-Lopez are professors with the College of Education at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Mexican American: Population

Mexican Americans are a unique group—a group that Mendoza (1994) writes is at a crossroad in regards to ethnic identity. We are not all Latinos nor Hispanics. In fact, many Mexican Americans have generational ties to the United States that go back hundreds of years while some of us have only been in this country for short periods of time (Oboler, 1995: Valdés, 1996).

For many of us, our loyalties and cultural references are intertwined with that of the United States. Some of us do not speak Spanish and have never been to Mexico, while some of us do speak Spanish and travel to Mexico on a regular basis. We possess a culture that is distinct in that we are both American and Mexican.

Mexican Americans are the youngest, largest, and fastest growing sub-group within the United States Hispanic population (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). Currently, 59% of all Hispanics are of Mexican American origin. It is estimated that by the year 2080 the Mexican American population will account for approximately 13 percent of the total U.S. population. The Mexican American population is also a very young group with the average age being around 24 years of age (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000).

Through the early 1900s, Mexican Americans were mainly a rural and agricultural people, but today over 90 percent of this population is estimated to live in metropolitan areas throughout the United States, which makes Mexican Americans and their young children more urbanized than the U.S. population as a whole (National Council of La Raza, 1998; U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000; Valdivieso, 1990).

The Mexican American population in the U.S. is also a group beset with many challenges stemming from high unemployment rates, poverty, poor housing conditions, and other health related problems. These problems, as unfortunate as they may be, eventually manifest themselves in low academic achievement, high drop rates, and low college enrollments (U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Nieto, 2000; Winzer & Mazurek, 1998) which have tremendous consequences for the social well-being of this country.

Parent Involvement: What Is It?

Defining parental involvement is something that school districts have continually been trying to deduce for years. For many school districts parental involvement simply entails connecting parents to the school by creating familiarity with teachers and facilities (Peña, 1999). Ill-advised as this may be for some teachers, simply getting parents to schools is enough.

The research is clear that if we want effective parental involvement it entails more than just getting parents to schools. As an alternative, the concept of *parents as partners* includes teaching and learning, recognition of parents as legitimate participants in school governance, fostering a sense of community, and supporting the development of parenting skills (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Like, many school wide efforts, meaningful parental involvement requires a systematic development of plans and programs (Gomez & Greenough, 2002) that should be designed to include rather than exclude.

The broad definitional base of what parental involvement is, as supported by sound research, affirms that if we want parents as *empowered* individuals and *decision makers* they need to comprehend what special education teachers are asking them to do. In order for that to occur, parents must be aware of their children's learning environment, be able to interpret

information about academic programs, and be able to evaluate in understandable terms the achievement of their children and the school.

The law as laid out by the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) also recognizes that parents must be informed of the above concepts for *true* partnerships to occur between schools and parents (Gomez & Greenough, 2002). Although the law is clear and mandates parent involvement in school districts, most districts have discretion over deciding what role they want parents to play, parent programs, and what kind of partnership teachers want to have with parents. Unfortunately, when schools and teachers are the primary decision makers concerning the kinds of partnerships they want to have with parents—parents can never be truly empowered.

World of Special Education

Historically, special education was designed with the intention of being a service provider for those children who were having problems in the regular education setting; its purpose was never to create permanent situations for a child's schooling experience. Special education should be a temporary individual service, a service that ensures that all children receive the help they need to be successful in classrooms and society.

The goal therefore of any special education program should be to provide the specialized assistance that is needed and then return children back to the general education classroom (Reyonds & Birch, 1977). Special education therefore should be a period of transition for children or as Skirtic (1988) describes "between stories" (p. xvi). And yet, for many language diverse children once placement in special education programs commences they remain there throughout their K-12 experiences (Baca & Cervantes,1989).

The word "*service*" holds relevance in that special education is grounded in the principle that all children can learn and are capable of reaching their full potential given the opportunity, effective teaching, and proper resources (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). Additionally, special education is a fundamental right—one that is grounded in the notion that all individuals have the right to receive a free "*appropriate*" education regardless of cultural group (Baca & Cervantes, 1989; Winzer & Mazurek, 1998).

The term appropriate also poses unique problems for children like Mexican Americans in that many of these children are often second language learners. Often times what special education teachers may deem as appropriate is not really appropriate for that child at all. According to Winzer and Mazurek (1989), "special education was not designed with the needs of diverse children in mind and has not been noted for its responsiveness to cultural differences" (p. 86). They also attest that special factors must be considered when defining a language diverse child who is exceptional. Although hard to believe, the special education community has only recently given attention to this area (Rueda, 1989).

Benefits: Mexican Americans and Special Education

Parent partnership is a crucial element in the well being of *all* children regardless of cultural group. Research and practice has shown that parents' participation in their child's education is an important element for student achievement (Muscott, 2002; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Rosado, 1994; Sileo, Sileo, & Prater, 1996).

Furthermore, federal law, specifically the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandates collaboration between parents and throughout the entire special education process, not just when the IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) or IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plan) is being developed. And yet, for many Mexican American parents' schools are often foreign entities that represent an incomprehensible system that is controlled by others for others.

Partnerships between Mexican American parents and special education teachers should be the core element of any special education program. Programs in which parents are empowered do much to empower children in achievement and learning (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Parents should be the primary contributes of knowledge concerning their children's action, behaviors, attitudes, language, and culture that are necessary and useful information for educational planning and curriculum development.

Mexican American parents are the primary teachers of young children. Bowman (1989) points out that "children are taught to act, believe, and feel in ways that are consistent with the mores and values of their communities" (p. 119). To promote healthy self-esteem of each and every child, special education programs must be thoughtfully designed to serve both parents and children—all the more so for those who speak a language other than English at home. Kagen (1989) has gone as far as suggesting that special education programs must serve the *whole* child's developmental needs which includes social, emotional, and physical well-being.

According to Gomez and Greenough (2002) and Ochoa and Mardirosian (1996), the impact of parent involvement has been shown to:

(a) Increase parents understanding of the school and their involvement in their children's education.

(b) Promote more confidence in parents, who therefore become more vocal in their involvement with teachers.

(c) Foster more positive feelings about their role as parents.

(d) Increase parents' willingness to participate in school related activities and volunteer their time.

(e) Increase parents' interaction with their children's teachers and principals.

Best Practices: Mexican American Families and Special Education Teachers

Creating successful partnerships between Mexican American families and special education teachers can be a scary task for teachers, but also offers great opportunities in terms of talent, energy, and potential. Most teachers who tend to come from white, middle class backgrounds may not have the experience in working with children who are culturally and linguistically different, resulting in little understanding of the cultural contexts that these children come from.

Although,well intentioned as these teachers may want to be, they simply may not have the pedagogical knowledge base to draw upon nor the skills to recognize how their beliefs and attitudes about culturally diverse children impact their teaching (Groulx, 2001; Jones & Fuller, 2003; Nieto, 2004).

We believe that for best practices in developing effective parent partnerships between Mexican American families and special education teachers to take place, the following are necessary and need to be taken into account:

◆ First and foremost, do not assume or stereotype anything concerning

Mexican American families as they may differ in regards to linguistic ability, acculturation levels, socioeconomic status, education level, experience, etc.

◆ Trustworthiness is a major factor that absolutely needs to be developed when working with Mexican American families. As mentioned by Sue & Sue (1999), the need to develop credibility and trustworthiness has been found to elicit a bonding experience in which those involved work toward a common goal. For many Mexican American families this bonding experience often needs to be place before they are willing to feel safe to participate in the educational process. Trustworthiness is not a given, but something that needs to be developed and nurtured. The importance of trustworthiness cannot be overstated.

◆ Come to know the literacy proficiency of the families you interact with as some families may be highly fluent in the language of the schools including special education jargon while others may have limited or no fluency in this area and some may not even be fluent in the native language (Bermudez, & Marquez, 1996; Sanchez-Violand, Sutton, & Ware, 1991). For Mexican American families, attending IEP meetings can be an incredibly intimidating experience and they may not understand what is being said to them or being asked of them. Often times, these experiences leave such horrific lasting impressions that for many Mexican American families the parent teacher partnership is eradicated, resulting in the silencing of these parents.

◆ Find out which language Mexican American parents feel more comfortable and fluent in. Some parents may have some oral English language skills, but they may comprehend and feel more comfortable in their native language. For many Mexican Americans, society has made them feel that their language is subordinate to English, and therefore they may feel undervalued by school personnel who often make no attempts at asking what language preference they have. Many times homework or notes sent home by teachers are in English only and offer no translation, often leading to a lack of response on behalf of those parents of whom English is not their primary language (Peña, 1999; Valdés, 1996).

◆ Acculturation issues need to be taken into account when working with Mexican American families. The length of time a family has been in this country often affects how these families view involvement and what their role should be. Families born in Mexico thus may adhere to traditional roles and may see their role in the schools along gender lines by which women stay at home and men go off to work supporting the family financially. From their worldview, the child's academic development is a function only of the school (Peña, 1999; Violand-Sanchez, Sutton, & Ware, 1991).

◆ Special education practitioners must come to terms with the fact that many Mexican Americans parents lack the confidence in trying to negotiate how schools work. For many recent immigrants for whom English is not their first language, schools can be a scary place. Many parents may not believe that their participation is essential and that they should not interfere with professionals such as teachers, and as a result remove themselves from that process (Lian, Fontanez-Pheland, 2001). For example, in traditional Mexican American households teachers are held in such high esteem that parents will often blame themselves first for the failure of their children without even considering that the problem could be the teacher or the educational program. Many teachers often take for granted and assume that parents know what participation entails and what their accepted role should be, often leading to presumptions that may not be grounded in real truths (Quiroz, Greenfield & Alchech, 1999).

Final Thoughts

Mexican Americans are a unique group within the U.S. population. We come from such diverse backgrounds with various language skills, educational levels, practical skills, and social economic status, therefore making it difficult to lump us all in one category, although many have made attempts to do so. Trying to implement authentic partnerships with these families entails that this must be done in a culturally sensitive manner in which listening, communicating, and respect are intact components of the special education experience. Without these components special education can only serve *half* and not the *whole* child, resulting in the neglect of the family and their needs.

Within the development of partnerships with Mexican American families practitioners in special education must come to terms with the cultural identities and the cultural groups to which these families belong. The key players in trying to work with children with exceptionalities are their families and their communities. Special education programs should aim to prepare all practitioners and caregivers to work sensitively and effectively with Mexican American families and their children.

Finally, we believe that practitioners within the field of special education need to develop a greater understanding of the features that comprise Mexican American families as they play the central figure in their children's rearing and socialization practices, communication styles, and orientation toward formal ways of education. We believe that nothing can be more basic than this.

Note

As a reference for this paper, Mexican Americans will generally be defined as those individuals born in the United States with ancestral ties to Mexico (Nieto, 2004).

References

Baca, L M.., Cervantes, H. T. (1989). *The bilingual special educations interface* (3rd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Bermudez, A.B., & Marquez, J.A. (1996). An examination of a four way collaborative to increase parental involvement in the schools. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 16*, 1-16.

Bowman, B. T. (1989). Educating language minority children: Challenges and opportunities. *Phi Delta Kappan, 71*(2), 118-121.

Gomez, R. & Greenough, R. (2002). *Parental involvement under the new Title I & TitleIII: From compliance to effective practice.* Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Jones, T.G. & Fuller, M. (2003). *Teaching Hispanic children*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Groulx, J. G. (2001). Changing preservice perceptions of minority schools. *Urban Education, 36*(1), 60-92.

Kagen, S. L. (1989). Early care and education: Beyond the schoolhouse doors. *Phi Delta Kappan, 71*(2), 107-112.

Kalyanpur, M. & Harry, B. (1999). *Culture in special education: Building reciprocal family-professional relationships*. Baltimore: Paul

Brookes Publishing.

Lian, M. J. & Fontanez, S.M. (2001). Perceptions of Latino parents regarding cultural and linguistic issues and advocacy for children with disabilities. *The Journal of the Association for Person with Severe Handicaps, 26*(3), 189-94.

Medoza, J. (1994). On being Mexican American. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*, 293-5.

Muscott, H.S. (2002). Exceptional partnerships: Listening to the voices of families. *Preventing School Failure, 46*(2), 66-9.

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: Author.

National Council of La Raza. (1998-July). *Latino education: Status and prospects*. Washington, DC: Author.

Nicholson, K., Evans, J, & Tellier-Robinson, D. (2001). Allowing the voices of parents to help shape teaching and learning. *The Educational Forum, 65(*2), 176-85.

Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.

Oboler, S. (1993). *Ethnic labels, Latino lives: Identity and the politics of (re)presentation in the United States*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Ochoa, A. M., & Mardirosian, V. (1996). Investing in the future of youth: Parent training. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 16*, 85-113.

Pena, C. D. (1999). Mexican American family involvement. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 35*(4), 166-69.

Rosado, L. A. (1994). Promoting partnerships with minority parents: A revolution in today's restructuring efforts. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students, 14*, 241-254.

Quiroz, B., Greenfield, P. M., & Altchech, M. (1999). Bridging cultures with a parent teacher conference. *Educational Leadership, 56*(7), 68-70.

Rueda, R. (1989). *Defining mild disabilities with language minority students. Exceptional Children, 56*(2), 121-128.

Sanchez-Violand, E., Sutton, C., & Ware, H. (1991). *Fostering home-school cooperation: Involving language minority families as partners in education*. Retrieved July 4, 2004, from http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/pigs/pig6.htm

Skirtic, T. M. (1988). The organizational context of special education. In E. Meyers & T. Skirtic (Eds.), *Exceptional children and youth* (3rd ed., pp. 479-517). Denver, CO: Love Publishing.

Sileo, T., Sileo, A., Prater, M.A. (1996). Parent and professional partnerships in special education: Multicultural considerations. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 31*, 145-53.

Sue, D.W., & Sue, D. (1999). *Counseling the culturally different: Theory and practices* (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley & Sons.

U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education (1999-2000). *Study of personnel needs in special education* (SPENSE). Retrieved July 4, 2004, from http://ferdig.coe.ufl.edu/spense/index.htm.

United States Bureau of Census. (2000). *The Hispanic market*. Retrieved July 5, 2004 from http//:www.hispanic-market.com.

United States Department of Education (2003). *National Center for Education Statistics: Status and trends in the education of Hispanics*, (NCES 2003-008). Washington, DC: Author.

Valdés, G. (1996). *Con respecto: Bridging the distance between culturally diverse families and schools: An ethnographic portrait*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Valdiveso, R. (1990). *Demographic trends of the Mexican American population: Implications for schools*. (ERIC Clearinghouse of Rural Education and Small Schools. ED3211961).

Winzer, M. A., & Mazurek, K. (1989). *Special education in multicultural contexts*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.