Cultural Brokering as a Core Practice of a Special Education Parent Liaison Program in a Large Urban School District

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Cultural brokering has been identified as an important skill for practitioners in urban school districts who are attempting to improve connections between home and school. This paper describes an evaluation of the special education liaison program in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), a large urban district located in the Midwest. Findings from the evaluation indicated that a substantial part of the liaison's job involved cultural brokering. Qualitative results share service provider voice in describing activities specific to cultural brokering practices. The importance of these activities in urban schools and future research needs are discussed.

Schools serving urban populations with diverse cultural backgrounds face unique challenges to maintain and sustain parent involvement in schools, and must develop strategic initiatives to connect schools and families. As Boyd & Correa (2005) noted, "to reduce cultural clashes and have positive outcomes for families and children, it is critical to train professionals to implement family- and culture- centered practices" (pg. 9). In 2002, the Indianapolis Public School district (IPS), a large urban school district located in the Midwestern part of the United States initiated a parent liaison program specifically to assist and support families from minority backgrounds in both understanding the IPS special educational system and increasing their meaningful involvement in that system. In the summer of 2005, researchers from a local university were hired to conduct a formative evaluation study of IPS's special education liaison program during its early implementation phase (i.e., first year of operations) to examine its development and suggest areas for improvement or

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expansion (Howland et al., 2006).

Howland and colleagues (2006) discovered that one of the primary services this program provided was "cultural brokering" (Delgado-Gaitan,1996), defined by the evaluation team as "activities that assist marginalized families in navigating and/or interpreting the middle-class cultural paradigm from which most public schools currently operate." These activities included translation and helping parents learn how to advocate for their children within the special education and public school system, as well as supporting parents during case conferences/ parent conferences (Howland et al., 2006). Evaluation results indicated that cultural brokering accounted for 35% of the services/supports that the program provided to families. Because cultural brokering was so prevalent in our findings and also found to be under-examined in the literature (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Delgado-Gaitan, 1996), the purpose of this article is to more deeply explore the concept of cultural brokering vis-à-vis the reality of these family-driven services through the perspective of the IPS' special education liaisons and the program director.

Literature Review

Although the literature base examining the unique role of parent liaisons is limited (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2000; Hermanson & Hoagland, 2002), at least two critical attributes of effective liaisons have been identified: cultural responsiveness and community connectedness. Cultural responsiveness seems to encompass the role cultural broker, a term introduced by Delgado-Gaitan (1996) and subsequently applied by Chrispeels and Rivero (2000) to describe instructors selected for an intervention program for Latino immigrant parents. Delgado-Gaitan (1996) used the phrase cultural broker to describe a Caucasian educator whom, because of his long affiliation with a Latino community, was able to act as 'interpreter' of majority ethnic and cultural standards for this community. The application of the term of cultural broker to the role of the liaisons in IPS reflects the usage of this term by both Delgado-Gaitan (1996) and Chrispeels and Rivero (2000). However, in our work the term is applied on a broader level that encompasses an urban culture defined not only by race or ethnicity, but also by socio-economic status and communication barriers, including limited familiarity with professional/education terminology as well as home languages other than English.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in a theoretical model of parent involvement developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, 2005), labeling theory (Smith, Osbourne, Crim, & Rhu, 1986), and multicultural literature framing cultural competencies. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's theoretical model for parent involvement provide three psychological contributors to parent involvement: parents' motivational beliefs, parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement, and parents' perceptions of their own life context (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Walker, et al, 2005). Labeling theory explores how power is exerted by a dominant group through guidelines and rules for the labeling of other individuals and groups within a socially constructed, reified framework. Multicultural education that has evolved from cultural competency research examines various aspects of ethnic understanding that teachers must possess to effectively educate students (Bennett, 2001). Researchers have argued that U.S. schools operate under Eurocentric values, documenting various classroom interactions as evidence of this bias (Banks & Banks, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Sleeter et al., 2004). Building from these theoretical underpinnings, this study examined the cultural brokering activities that naturally emerged from the family services that were provided by the IPS parent liaisons.

Methods

During their evaluation of the IPS special education liaison program, Howland et al. (2006) noted that the parent liaison's role as "cultural broker" was a recurrent theme that needed further exploration. For this study, data specific to this theme were extracted from the larger data set for a more in-depth analysis of the emergence of this family-driven service (Merriam, 1998). This evaluation was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the local university.

Program context

IPS is an urban district that serves approximately 37,000 students. At the time of data collection for this study, the IPS student population was approximately 58% African American, 28% Caucasian, 10% Latino, and 3% self identified as Multiracial. Approximately 77% of

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families qualified for free lunch and another 12% received reduced lunch services. Of the families IPS was serving at the time of data collection, 24% lived in poverty, 28% reported earning less than a high school education, and slightly more than 55% of IPS students lived in single parent homes. Additionally, IPS was providing special education support for almost 20% of its student population. The special education liaison program initially was designed to primarily serve families from African American and Latino backgrounds and specifically, families of students either identified with disabilities or at-risk for such identification. According to IPS personnel, the district had not been successfully addressing the needs of IPS families from minority backgrounds through existing community and state agencies that were ostensibly in place to support families of students with special needs. Therefore, grant money was secured by the IPS Special Education Department to develop and pilot its own program. When originally conceptualized, program outcomes were defined broadly to focus on increasing parental engagement in the special education process and developing parent advocacy skills. Defining the outcomes so broadly was a deliberate attempt to ensure that both the program design and services emerged based on the needs and desires expressed by families as opposed to educators.

Participants

The IPS special education liaison program continues to employ two parent liaisons (one representative of African-American culture and one of Latino culture). Even though both liaisons had limited experience with special education prior to starting, the dynamic knowledge both had with urban community engagement was considered a valuable attribute in the hiring decision. The two liaisons were provided with a variety of early training experiences to provide specific knowledge about the special education and IPS to help them develop their new roles as liaisons. Both liaisons are middle-aged women, currently middle class, married, and report being Christian. As mentioned, one of the liaisons is African-American, monolingual, has a child with a disability, and is originally from the Southwest. Her previous work experience includes teaching and working in the juvenile justice system. The second liaison is Latina; a mother of two children, bilingual, and originally from South America. Her previous work experience was in social and family services. The liaisons engage in a variety of activities to assist families in

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developing advocacy skills and navigating the educational system.
Procedures

Original data collection began in May 2005 and continued through December 2005. Data sources included interviews, documents and artifact reviews, and focus groups. All interview and focus group data were audio taped and transcribed for analysis. For the purpose of this study, only analyses from the interview data related to the research question of interest are presented (interview questions are provided in Appendix A).

Initially, interviews were conducted with the two parent facilitators to gain insight into program operation and activities, as well as to understand the day-to-day activities of the liaisons themselves. Interviews averaged an hour in length and were conducted face-to-face, using a discussion format designed to provide the evaluators the opportunity to explore meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 1998). Each interview was transcribed and returned to the interviewee to check for accuracy and also seek additional input (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Information from the initial interviews was then used to develop an interview protocol for subsequent interviews with district level administrators and special education department supervisors. The Director of Special Education and Student Services (now retired), who initially conceived the program and secured funding for its development was interviewed next. Finally, another interview was conducted with the parent facilitators to verify the findings of the study.

Results

The qualitative results of this study serve to offer insight about how the parent liaison program was able to emerge and sustain itself, as well as how cultural brokering evolved as the services were implemented. The voices of the Director of Special Education, as well as the liaisons themselves offered a glimpse into the rationale, development, values, and decision-making embedded in this program.

When speaking about the need for the parent liaison program, the now retired IPS Director for Special Education stated:
"As an urban director, I have a stronger mandate I think, ethically, morally, and professionally to make sure our parents understand their rights and are engaged in the process of their child's special education… And I tried a number of things. I had a contract with (a state parent support

network), to try and help with this. We tried manuals, folders, goodie and informational bags…but it was way too complicated and didn't meet the needs of our families. We tried lots things, but everything we were doing, we were doing from the perspective of us and what worked for us, so we were "missing the boat" with the families, with the families I was trying to reach at least (sic)".

She went on to illustrate how the services offered by the parent liaisons reflect cultural brokering, describing two very different types of skill sets:

"[The liaisons] Diana and Rachel, in some sense, do things a little different, because Rachel has been used to families who are disengaged because of a lack of understanding of English. And so they aren't necessarily families that are in crisis. Where Diana may have done more of the kind of cases where families were in crisis with regard to their relationship with the school… they had advantages in terms of their understanding of culture, their ability to connect with families, their backgrounds of connecting with families, that in my opinion, was more important".

In an effort to meet the needs of IPS families, the director set the stage for culturally responsive practices to emerge. She was leading with the spirit and intent of culturally responsive practice, rather then following a pre-defined manual or program. The liaisons themselves offered an even deeper understanding of how these ideals and skills played out in daily services. Rachel describes her role with families in the following way:

"I work with a lot of families from Mexico, some from rural areas. Many didn't even know there were services for their children with disabilities or that they should send them to school. They come from another country and have no idea how the educational system works here, and then there's the special education system, which can be very confusing to families".

Staying true to the diverse needs of the families, Diana shared another aspect of cultural brokering:

"A lot of what I do, besides getting help for immediate, you know food, warm coats, glasses, those kinds of things, is to help parents see the school's perspective and to get the school to understand the parent's perspective. A lot of our parents have had bad experiences with schools, um even with their own education growing up, so they are defensive and sometimes really angry when dealing with their own children. A

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lot of times I coach the parent ahead of time on what to say and how to approach the school to solve the problem. Most of the time, they want me to go with them. I try not to do the talking, but sometimes I have to help explain, you know, help them understand some of the educational terms used. A lot of times they say just me being there with them helps them stay calm and strong enough to get things in place for their child. Then I always try to help them find a positive connection to their school, with another parent, or even a custodian. Someone who knows the school and can help them, you know, know where to go and who's who".

While Rachel and Diana both describe different services and experiences that were specific to the needs of the families they served, they both worked from the foundation created by the special education director to offer services and supports that were defined by families, not for families.

Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that cultural brokering is a crucial aspect of the IPS special education liaison program. Indeed, in the time since this study was conducted, the grant funding for this program ran out. At the same time, the district experienced a substantial budget cut and many programs and services were eliminated or reduced. However, the IPS Special Education Department chose to continue to fund this program. This supports ongoing calls from educators, researchers, and families for educational services to be more culturally responsive (Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2002; Harry et al., 1995; Harry, 2006). Indeed, the cultural brokering provided by the IPS parent liaisons appears to exemplify culturally responsive best practice.

Boyd and Correa (2005) pointed out that families from minority backgrounds do not fully utilize formal family supports or programs, instead often preferring informal sources of support such as those offered by the church or the community. The work of IPS in developing and implementing its special education liaison program seems to recognize the importance of less formal support and may offer a blue print for other K-12 districts interested in developing culturally responsive supports for families. Liaison activities such as helping provide transportation, translating both words and school culture, networking to find support for basic living needs like food, shelter, clothing, in addition to providing emotional support and advocacy in school meetings were all noted by IPS families as examples of cultural

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brokering. Such services and supports should be living, dynamic activities that are responsive to desires and needs of the community.

In closing, we encourage schools to actively seek out and engage families as core members of an effective educational system. We also call on researchers to further examine cultural brokering by exploring its definition, the extent to which it contributes to culturally responsive practice in education, and how it impacts student outcomes. Foundational research (e.g., Boyd & Correa, 2005; Gay, 2002; Harry, 2002) can be the spring board for further study in addressing the dynamic nature of urban schools and how educators can better connect with the families they serve.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview questions for IPS personnel:

1. What factors prompted the inception of this program?
2. How has this program evolved?
3. What do you perceive as the greatest benefit(s) of this program?
4. What do you perceive as the greatest challenge(s) to the existing program?
5. Describe the identification and referral process of families to the program.
6. Describe the primary reason(s) for family referrals to the program.
7. Describe the types of program services families receive.
8. Are there strategies in place to inform families regarding the program? If so, what are they?
9. Are there procedures in place that allow families to self-initiate a referral or to access the program without a referral? If so, what are they?
10. If procedures allow, describe the primary reason(s) families choose to access the program or self-initiate a referral?
11. What are some of the observed positive outcomes for students whose families have received program services?
12. How do you conceive the role of an effective school liaison?
13. What prerequisites skills or personal characteristics define the role of an effective school liaison?
14. What are the intended short-term (1-3 yrs.) outcomes of the program?
15. What are the intended long-term outcomes (5-7 yrs.) of the program?
16. How do you conceive program expansion?

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