

Latino Parents' Involvement In Education

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“Como le va ha David en la escuela este año?” Mrs. Martinez responds, “Le va muy bien.” Mrs. Martinez pauses, thinks for a minute then adds, “Bueno, pienso que le va bien porque no me han mandado ningunas noticias malas.” On a quest to “get out of myself,” I found myself having this conversation over dinner at a former student’s house. That night when I went home I had difficulty sleeping. I kept wondering, *why didn’t Mrs. Martinez know exactly how David was doing in school?* I’ve known Mrs. Martinez for the last five years and I have had two out of her four children in my classroom. I had her eldest son for two years when we looped together from 3rd to 4th grade. Then I had her eldest daughter, last year, for fourth grade. Having worked so closely with Mrs. Martinez, I know what a loving, caring, and concerned mother she is. So *why does she not know exactly how her children are doing in school? Why is she not involved in the Parent Teacher Association? Why are her children not performing where they should be in school? How can the school help Mrs. Martinez become a more involved parent? How can the school and Mrs. Martinez effectively work together on homework? What responsibility does the school have in getting parents like Mrs. Martinez involved in school? These are some of the questions that I wanted to answer through my research.*

Why Do We Need to Encourage Parent Involvement Amongst Latino

Students?

“Research indicates that tremendous academic achievement results when parents or family members become involved in students’ education. Parent involvement can increase academic and language achievement; improve

behavior, attitudes toward school and parent-child relationships; help parents improve their own self-confidence and expertise; improve home-school relations; and increase student's cognitive growth" (Quezada, Diaz, and Sanchez 32). As an adult in this country, I have often heard that Latino people do not want to their children to learn English and they want too many accommodations made for them. I really believe that nothing is farther from the truth. We also discussed in class, that in fact, Latino parents want their children to learn English quickly and transition out of a bilingual program. Latino parents are already helping at home and want the best for their children, so we need to think about how we can school change to be a more inviting place for all parents. There are many advantages to joining forces with parents in educating students. Although, this may seem like a very large task, it is not impossible. I strongly believe that involving parents in their children's education is necessary. As teachers, it is our responsibility to encourage and foster this participation.

Barriers We Must Overcome

Encouraging parental involvement is challenging within itself however working with Latino parents can add an extra element of difficulty. Dealing with language barriers can be trying. However, it is important to expand the resources we have available to us already. In other words, *how can we make the most of what we have? Can we have members of our community or staffs help us? Is there something a parent in our school can do to help us?* Although, they are not perfect, there is a lot of software available that can help decrease

the language barrier. Using members in the community to help translate letters or help make phone calls can help get information translated to parents.

As discussed in class, we need to get creative. We discussed how one teacher put an apple on the papers that were necessary to be translated. For example, purchasing translating devices and sharing with the fire department or police department is a creative way to make the most of your resources.

Regardless of the methods you choose to reach out to parents, they will often be very appreciative that you are reaching out to help them. Whether your translations are imperfect or you need parents to help communicate with others, you deliver the message that communicating with parents is important to you. Parents respond to being treated with respect and they will usually congratulate your efforts.

Cultural barriers may be even more difficult to overcome than language barriers. Understanding the way people live their lives is difficult. Understanding values and customs different than ours is a life-long process. For example, some teachers may believe that Latino parents do not care about their children's education if the parents do not show up to open house or parent teacher conferences. However, teachers need to stop and think about whether or not parents are working, perhaps the parents believe that involvement means interfering with teachers doing their jobs, whether babysitting is available or not, and many more factors. To simply think that parents do not care is an easy answer.

However, as educators it is our responsibility to find out more about the culture of the families we teach. In my example of parent teacher conferences or open house, we need to think about what is wrong with the arrangements we have made if parents are not showing up. What can we do to make a better fit with our school activity and our parents? As discussed in class, we need to think outside of the box when planning school-related activities. When getting to know the parents in your school Bruce Davis recommends considering, where are the parents from? What are their plans for the future? What do they expect from their schools? What is the average income? What is the average level of education? (Davis, 25) Before planning any type of school event these questions should be asked and considered. Often times we plan meetings the same way as they were planned when we attended school or we plan them at a time that is convenient for us. It is my belief that if we invest the time to accommodate our Latino parents, then the benefits will end up saving us a lot of time. In other words, *what do I need to understand about Mrs. Martinez before I expect her to get involved?*

Latino Parents as Teachers

We often forget that most parents do not have the training and educational background that we do. We expect parents to be able to help with schoolwork as we do. If we want parents to become partners in learning then we are going to have to invest the time necessary to train them. A handbook, which was written for Jefferson County Public School entitled, "Best Practices for Parent Involvement" recommends involving parents as aides in classrooms, volunteers

in the building, assisting with homework, or listening to their child read (24). We are going to have to open up our classroom doors and welcome parents in. We cannot expect them to magically know what is going on in our classrooms without inviting them in. As a teacher, it can be intimidating to have parents come into our classrooms and see what we are doing. However, we need to stretch our comfort level and encourage this parental involvement.

I truly believe that parents want to help their children succeed academically, but they are not sure how they can help. Parents need to be shown how they can help at home. As educators, this becomes our responsibility and can be done by either having classes for our parents and/or inviting them into our classrooms. It is also important to note that even when parents do not speak English they can take the role of teacher. As discussed in class, it is important for our parents to maintain rich conversation and cognitive development in their native tongue. Students will be able to transfer over the information into their second language. It is important that parents see themselves as the valuable resources that they are. It is also important for them to know that they play a serious role in the cognitive development of their children. *With the proper training and experience Mrs. Martinez could better help her children at home with their schoolwork. I wonder if she even knows how important her role is? Does she even realize the importance of maintaining rich conversation and learning with her children in Spanish?*

Involving Latino Parents in Homework

“The presence of family and community in the curriculum does not necessarily require their physical presence in the school (although it certainly can be a good idea whenever feasible). It does require, however, the presence of parents’ perspective, their experience, their history, and their words” (Reyes, 236). Latino parents may feel pretty helpless when it comes to helping their children with homework. It is up to us, as educators, to point out the positive things parents have to offer their children. First of all, it is important to emphasize the importance of a good learning environment. Having a specific time in the evening where it is quiet so that everyone can do their homework will assure that everyone’s homework will get done. Parents can also help their children in reading by simply modeling it themselves. Parents should have books, magazines, and newspapers around the house that they read. This sends a clear message to their children that reading is important.

Another way that parents can help is by finding someone to help tutor their children or someone they can call on the phone if they have a question. Often, Latino parents have a network of adults who help out in the areas that are their strengths. Neighbors or high school students may be able to help children with their homework, if the adults are not able to. As discussed many times in class, our Latino parents can provide a valuable tool to our children and that is conversing with their children. Children need to hear rich language around them all the time. It is important to educate our parents so that they know they should continue to converse with their children in Spanish and help develop their

bilingualism. Often, teachers tell parents to try and have the children speak English at home. However, this elementary, broken English does not help to foster the children's cognitive development. When parents do not speak the same language as the language their children are learning in school, it makes it a little more difficult to help. However, this is not an excuse for us to throw our hands up and say that parents cannot help at home. It is our job to help them problem solve and come up with a solution. *I really believe that Mrs. Martinez's family would benefit from a quiet homework time. With two small children in the house it makes it very difficult for the two older ones to get their work done. Also, I think it would benefit them to see their mother reading. We cannot make these expectations of Mrs. Martinez without teaching her or giving her the proper motivation.*

Getting Latino Parents Involved in School Activities

We have school activities for different reasons. It may be to communicate student's progress or to foster the social development of children, build a sense of community for the families in our school or just to have fun. We need to get the Latino parents involved in these activities. They need to not only become passive observers but active participants. To begin with, Parent Teacher Conferences or Open House can be difficult for our Latino Parents since they may not be able to attend due to having small children. Also, we need to consider whether or not they speak English. Do they need a translator? Are they going to bring their own translator? Do the children need to become the translator? In my opinion, it is not the job of the children to translate. It is a big

responsibility and burden for our children. We need to do our best to make accommodations to meet the needs of our families and to respect parents. Children as translators can upset the power balance within a family and demean the parents. Sure, children can help in a time of need, but that should be the last resort.

At school we have other activities that are for learning experiences. Most classrooms take field trips. How can parents help, even if they are not strong in English? We often see our Latino parents not signing up to volunteer for field trips because they do not speak English. It is the responsibility of the school and teachers to encourage parents to come along on such wonderful learning experiences. Parents may not willingly volunteer to come on a field trip. I think about myself. If I moved with my family to China and my child's class was going on a field trip, I can pretty much be sure that I would not be volunteering to go with on that field trip. I would not volunteer, not because I do not care about my child's education, but because I would not be able to understand the teacher or her directions. I would also be afraid of not understanding and looking silly in front of the other parent volunteers. I would think that I could not be of any help to the children in the group. However, if the teacher or the principal suggested or encouraged me to come along, then I most likely would feel better about going. I would feel that they believe me to be competent enough to go on the field trip. A Latino parent may be beneficial for a group of bilingual students to converse, in Spanish, about what they saw on the field trip so they may process the

experience better in their native language. Something as simple as personally asking a parent to join us on a field trip can take us a long way.

Some school events have been arranged or planned just merely for fun. The Parent Teacher Association is an important part of building this home-school connection. This is the purpose of the association. Not only does it build a sense of community, it can bridge the gap between home and school, but it has also been found to be connected to student achievement. "Parent participation in the PTO could affect the child's achievement through several mechanisms that are not mutually exclusive changing teacher perceptions of the child because of familiarity with the parents, establishing accountability because of the relationships fostered between teachers and parents, increasing the child's motivation by understanding that school is important to the parent, and increasing actual learning opportunities if PTO efforts are directed toward increased school resources." (Desimone, 16).

If the PTA/PTO is such a wonderful organization, then why are our Latino parents not as involved? Again, I believe they have been alienated and not welcomed to come. Some people may think that it is the job of the Latino parents to get involved themselves. However, I think it is our job to welcome them since we speak English (the language spoken at school).

I think in order to make a transition to a more representative population in our PTA, it would take one parent to get involved who speaks both Spanish and English fairly well. If that parent joined the PTA then he or she could begin encouraging other Latino parents to participate in more school activities. I have

been to PTA events where Latino parents have signed up as volunteers and once they get there, they realize no one is there to explain to them what they need to do. Hopefully, with more bilingual parents on the PTA this would not occur again. I think it was very brave of those parents to volunteer, and I am hoping they were not discouraged from volunteering again. I am not sure that I would be so brave as to volunteer for an activity in my child's school in a different country.

I have seen Mrs. Martinez comes to our school's Open House and Parent Teacher Conferences. She always takes the initiative to ask about her children's progress and encourages teachers to call her if there is any problem. However, she has not volunteered to come along on any field trips or come to any PTA events. It is my belief that Mrs. Martinez would be more involved in school related activities if we would only make it possible for her.

Involving Latino Parents as Students

Just as we have a lot to learn from our Latino parents, they too have a lot to learn from us. We need to consider what we have, as educators, to provide to our Latino parents. First of all, we have English. Our schools should provide English language classes to our parents. These classes are offered elsewhere but are often times at colleges, or at other places that are unfamiliar to our parents. What better place to offer language classes, then our schools, where their children learn?

Also, we can provide workshops to our Latino parents to help them with parenting, learning how to communicate with teachers, becoming more involved

in school related activities, and other areas the parents would like to develop. A good way to assess the needs of the parents is with an interest survey to see where the parents in a particular community have the most need and what their concerns are.

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) offers a wonderful pro-active family program which helps foster the connection between parents and schools.

The IDRA provides quarterly workshops for parents on topics of your choice, such as:

- Building Self-Esteem in Our Children
- Improving Communication Between Home and School
- Dealing with Difficult Teen Issues
- Setting Limits Through Positive Self-Discipline
- Building Support Systems for Parenting
- Parent Leadership for Today's Schools.

The IDRA also provides training of teachers and your parent liaison on topics of your choice, such as:

- Effective Outreach Approaches
- Communicating Effectively with Parents
- Establishing a Parent Center
- Involving Parents in Decision Making
- School Activities That Attract Parents

The IDRA gives us some good ideas of services that a school district can provide the teachers and parents that can help bridge the connection between schools and families.

What parenting classes, language classes, or workshops would Mrs. Martinez be interested in attending? The best way to find out her needs would be with an interest survey or even take the time to get to know her better.

There is a lot of work to be done when creating an environment that is conducive to all parents participating. However, when we invest the time, we will see the payoff in our students' academics, social development, the climate of the school, and in other countless ways. Latino parents are our biggest untapped asset.

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