Waking the Sleeping Giant: Engaging and Capitalizing on the Sociocultural Strengths of the Latino Community

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Abstract

Putting together the language minority community's initiatives and talents into educational programs awakens the community's "sleeping giant" and untaps powerful resources for our school systems. Adopting a sociocultural perspective and using Arlington's Empowering Families Through Literacy as a case, this article analyzes an example of an educational project designed and implemented in an increasingly diverse, multicultural, and multilingual community by a group of grassroots organizations. Implementing lessons learned from research, theory, and standards for an effective pedagogy, and recognizing and building upon the students' first language and culture, this study exemplifies the conscious efforts of immigrant communities to join efforts to academically succeed in America.

Introduction

The alleged passivity of culturally and linguistically diverse families in the educational process of their children, particularly of low-income, recent immigrant families to the United States, is often discussed in faculty lounges. Cultural barriers, particularly linguistic differences, are highlighted as one of the main reasons why low-income immigrant parents do not actively participate in their children's school activities and their children do not excel academically. The end result yields poor academic achievement, high dropout rates, and increased frustration of all educational stakeholders. If we want all K-12 students to develop to their respective individual potentials, we may borrow from the economic game theory, the "non-zero sum game" concept, where every player can be a winner and where cooperation, teamwork, and the tapping in on knowledge and resources that each individual possesses is the key to success.

This qualitative project takes a proactive approach by analyzing a successful community-based educational program that promotes bilingual family literacy in Arlington, Virginia, in a cost effective matter. It is an example of how a grassroots community organization builds an academic learning community that respects the intellect of students and teachers and builds on the sociocultural resources of all participants. In doing so, Arlington's *Empowering Families Through Literacy* program empowers and strengthens self-confidence and self-esteem in its low-income immigrant adult learners and their children by working through culturally accommodated classrooms.

The endemic issue of the academic achievement gap and the consequently high dropout rates of Latino students have found the attention of educational scholars, academic organizations, and politicians. Different scholars have attempted to determine the factors that govern whether Latino students are to achieve success in American schools. Over the past three decades, numerous successful efforts have been carried out across America to help culturally and linguistically diverse students excel in schools. For example, 25 years ago the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) was established to work toward the improvement of academic achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students, reduce the steady high dropout rate among Latino students, and champion the language needs of minority students (Gomez, 2001, p. 5) In that same period, a number of other similar specialized academic organizations, research centers, and think tanks were developed.

During the 1990s, and in 1994 particularly, the federal government also increased its efforts to improve the academic achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students through different programs, such as the Goals 2000: Educate America Act; the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA); the Educational Research, Development, Dissemination, and Improvement Act; and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act. All of these addressed the issues by sponsoring and developing programs to help disadvantaged children meet challenging content and student performance standards and by encouraging innovative education, bilingual education, and safe, drug free schools. It also restructured the Department of Education's research office, created five national research institutes, 15 comprehensive regional assistance centers, and set new priorities for dissemination and improvement activities. During this same period, the government became aware that one in five of our nation's Latinos between the ages of 16 and 24 who ever enrolled in a U.S. school left school without either a high school diploma or an alternative certificate such as a GED, and that Hispanics account for nearly 90% of all immigrant dropouts. Consequently, the U.S. Department of Education undertook a Hispanic Dropout Project to study the nature of the Latino dropout problems and identify programs that effectively address these problems. In 1998, its final report, *No More Excuses*, was released.

At the school division level, superintendents from 14 traditionally high-achieving districts across the country undertook an important initiative in June 1999 and went to work on closing the racial/ethnic gaps in student achievement. This led to the establishment of a Minority Student Achievement Network (MSA), which continues to work in analyzing ways to improve the academic achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

The Sleeping Giant

The "Sleeping Giant" is not a subculture or segment of the population; rather, it refers to the fully alive and communicating society demonstrated at the community level. As the late Paulo Freire (1970, 1997, 1998) suggested, successful educational programs are those that emanate from the grassroots level with input from all parties involved. These same principles—building communities of marginalized people from the inside out—as Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) argue, provide valuable assistance in our efforts to solve some of America's most difficult issues, including the reform of our educational system. McKnight and Kretzmann, in a way reminiscent of Vygotsky (1978) and Freire's (1970, 1997, 1998) sociocultural perspective of education, have demonstrated that local communities are replete with assets that can be tapped into for revitalization and growth.

In a recent book (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000), Tharp and researchers from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence propose a pedagogy that builds on the sociocultural resources that both students and teachers bring to culturally accommodated classrooms. Tharp and his colleagues argue for the four goals of school reform—academic excellence, fairness, inclusion, and harmony—and propose a transformative educational model based and justified by new developments in sociocultural theory. These include Dalton's research on standards for effective teaching practice (Dalton, 1998).

Educating a culturally and linguistically diverse student population poses new challenges to America's school systems. A tension exists between traditional approaches to English literacy and community-based programs that recognize and build upon the students' first language and culture. Educators must look beyond school walls to the families and communities for fostering academic success. Local language minority communities can provide valuable untapped educational resources such as the "weekend schools" designed to offer children and their immigrant parents an opportunity to develop their natural joy for learning in an environment that values their cultural heritage (cf. Brandunas, 1988; Fishman, 1980).

The changing demographics of the student population in suburban American school districts pose distinct challenges to their educational stakeholders. Several educational issues must be revised if not transformed, especially the one-size-fits-all model. In the midst of a process of demographic changes, school systems must take into consideration the differing abilities, interests, learning styles, needs, and socioeconomic backgrounds of all its students—including the high achievers as well as the disadvantaged—and work together with them to develop all their respective potential. In order to achieve this, every student should be inspired, motivated, and expected to learn. It is important to focus on children's successes and to value the contributions that their parents make to the educational process. Deficit models should give way to empowerment experiences. School systems must instill youngsters with a sense of pride and ownership of their educational experience and inculcate in them a desire to continue learning, and to integrate it into their lifestyles.

Purpose and Background of Study

This study grew out of the need for an understanding of the Latino K-12 student population currently enrolled in Northern Virginia school divisions and the various efforts to close the academic achievement gaps for minority students. It deals with the experiences of the Salvadoran refugees who fled their country throughout the 1980s and arrived to the United States seeking political asylum. Their story is intimately related to American involvement in the Central American crisis. More than 200,000 of them chose the greater Washington metropolitan area as their new home.

The increased number of Salvadoran students in northern Virginia school districts has had a number of important implications, especially since these Latino students are becoming the largest segment of the school population. The education of their children is often one of the most important priorities in the lives of these refugees. Yet, most of these youngsters arrive to our schools with little preparation or knowledge of what to expect from the school system.

This study discusses the need to begin focusing on the more positive knowledge and experiences that Salvadoran parents and students bring to our schools, as well as the need to look for more creative, alternative solutions to improve their academic performance. It will close with the case study of a family literacy program launched four years ago by a partnership of grassroots organizations in Arlington, Virginia, which addresses the needs of Latino parents with limited English language fluency and limited literacy skills. The outcome of this partnership promises to be a successful educational practice.

The Latino Student Population: An Overview

Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States, and as such, they will be playing a vital role in America's future. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that as of November 1, 2000, there were 32.8 million Hispanics of any race living in the United States (i.e., 11.9% of the national population). While some Latino families have been in the United States since the sixteenth century when Spanish explorers began settling in New Mexico and Arizona, others are newly arrived immigrants and refugees who come from more than 20 different countries.

Demographic projections suggest that in the next decades Latinos will rapidly become the largest minority group in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Census, from being 11% of the nation's population in 1996, they will become 25% of the population in 2050. The same census report suggests that from 1995 to 2000, the Latino population alone will contribute 37% of the nation's growth; from 2000 to 2020, it will contribute 44%, and from 2020 to 2050, 62%.

The size of the above figures underscores the importance of the educational challenge ahead of us. Furthermore, the U.S. Bureau of the Census projected the Latinos as the youngest population group in the nation. In 1995 half of its population was 26 years old or younger. These figures suggest that the percentage of the Latino elementary and secondary school-age population will continue to grow in the next few decades.

Due to a number of socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors, in addition to the recent demographic changes, the quality of the Latino K-12 education in the United States has continued to deteriorate. Numerous sources, including the White House, report that the academic achievement gap that separates Latino students from mainstream students continues to widen. Latino students continue to fail in our schools (cf. The White House, 1996).

In analyzing the American educational system, the members of The President's Advisory Commission identified serious inadequacies such as the lack of access to early childhood, gifted and talented, remedial, or special education programs. Overall, they characterized Latino education in America by its "history of neglect, oppression, and periods of wanton denial of opportunity" and suggested that today the American educational system continues to "deny equitable educational opportunities to Hispanic Americans" (The White House, 1996, p. 13).

When discussing minority education in the United States, especially Latino education, we often tend to overlook the important role that the students' families and culture play in the overall learning process. At the beginning of this century, the eminent Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky reminded us

that, "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). A classic educational axiom is that parents or other caregivers are the students' first teachers. However, when working with low-income migrant and immigrant minority families, teachers and administrators fail to acknowledge and adapt to the different ways that the home and the community environments play in the overall educational process of these students.

More recently, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) in *Ways With Words,* and Luis Moll's work with "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1988, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) have reminded us of the tremendous untapped knowledge, experiences, and resources that students bring to school. Educators should focus on the positive experiences that these students bring with them and on their potential contributions to the overall educational process rather than on their alleged limitations or on their formal academic deficiencies.

When analyzing the lack of success of programs aimed at reversing the pattern of school failure among minority students, Cummins and others have suggested that one of the reasons for failure often is that these initiatives did not focus on altering the existing traditional relationships among teachers, parents, and students, and between schools and their communities. Therefore, Cummins emphasized the need to profoundly redefine the way classroom teachers and school administrators interact with the students and communities they serve. This becomes particularly important in school divisions, such as those of northern Virginia, that have experienced major demographic changes in a relatively short period of time.

Shifting Paradigms to Meet New Challenges

When dealing with educational challenges and problems, educators often employ—consciously or unconsciously—outdated theoretical models and paradigms with devastating effects on important segments of our student population. For example, despite acknowledging the inadequacy and limitations of such models as the one-size-fits-all, the deficit, and the factory, these paradigms continue to influence how our educational stakeholders analyze, design, and carry out programs. The consequence of this may well be the creation of failure as a byproduct of efforts to identify success. This ultimately generates more problems for society.

Often when dealing with language minority or immigrant students, we fail to look for more creative and alternative solutions. We unsuccessfully attempt to "tighten the screw" rather than identify and develop the individual strengths and funds of knowledge that these new populations bring with them. This may be due to the fact, as UNESCO's Manish Jain has suggested, that over the past three hundred years, educators have allowed the "modernity

paradigm" to play a significant role in shaping our notions of democracy, development, freedom, and growth (Manish, 1997). This continues to take place despite the acknowledgment that many policies influenced or inspired by this paradigm have been inadequate, or continue to be challenged, contested, and renegotiated.

Empowering Students

One of the biggest challenges that our schools face today is how to empower all students, mainstream and minority, with resourceful decision-making skills so that they can develop their full potential and foster personal responsibility for lifelong learning. This is not an easy task, especially in areas such as northern Virginia where school divisions are experiencing major demographic changes. For example, for the past two decades the student composition of Arlington Public Schools has been dramatically changing from being predominantly monolingual English-speaking to one that is increasingly diverse, multicultural, and multilingual. In 1999, 43% of the students came from homes where a language other than English is spoken.

To promote the development and success of each student, schools must become learning communities—environments where teachers, parents, and students have the freedom to look at the world from different perspectives in a creative, responsible way, and where each individual has the opportunity to review, correct, or improve his or her own efforts. This is particularly important in multicultural environments where students and teachers engage in diverse learning styles, worldviews, and epistemological approaches. Experience suggests that a side effect of the respectful acknowledgment and celebration of cultural differences often becomes the decisive factor in the empowerment of our minority students.

Understanding Diversity within the Latino Community: Intragroup and Intergroup

One of the strengths of the Latino community is its diversity. As a conceptual category, Latino includes people belonging to different academic, cultural, economic, ethnic, linguistic, national-origin, racial, religious, and social backgrounds (Trueba, 1999). Therefore, educators and school administrators must avoid oversimplifying the intrinsic complexity of this significant sector of the American student population especially when it comes to newcomers, such as Salvadoran immigrants, or other less known groups such as the Afro-Latinos.

Anthropologist Suzanne Oboler has reminded us that Hispanics/Latinos in the United States "all sing a different song" (Oboler, 1995, ch. 1). This is due to the fact that the various populations of Latin American descendants currently living in the United States, as previously indicated, came to this nation from more than 20 different countries. When analyzing the origins of the modes of incorporation into American society, we discover a tremendous range of different historical, political, economic, and social processes. In this context, generalizations are not only ineffective, but often impossible. Latinos come from many different countries, belong to all socioeconomic groups, and arrive in this country from many different circumstances. Furthermore, there are important differences in the socialization process of U.S.-born Latinos and those born and raised in Latin American countries.

As Aída Hurtado has pointed out, an understanding of the Latino population must acknowledge important intragroup (i.e., between different Latino groups) and intergroup (between Latinos and Anglos) differences that include such areas as socioeconomic class, ethnic dynamics, "familism," and Spanish-language maintenance (Hurtado, 1995). While some Latinos come from highly educated and sophisticated urban backgrounds, others came from isolated rural areas with limited access to formal education. Therefore, we find tremendous variation in the educational background of the foreign born—ranging from highly trained professionals to illiterate people—even within the same national and ethnic subgroup. The migratory experience is also highly diverse. While some people carefully planned their immigration, such as in the cases of family reunification or in the so-called cases of "brain drain," other Latinos fled their countries on very short notice due to war or civil strife.

Sociological research has traditionally portrayed Latinos as a disadvantaged segment of the American society that must often cope with such structural barriers as labor force discrimination, low earnings, and unstable employment opportunities. However, by using a deficit-focused model to analyze Latino issues or by overemphasizing the past history of discrimination and oppression, we nourish an overly negative perspective and a limited vision. It is important for educators to move away from a deficit-focused model and to move toward a more positive approach inspired by a resiliency model that recognizes and supports the vitality that exists in the Latino community and help build upon its strengths.

The Latino Family in the United States

The Latino family, although undergoing important changes, continues to play a critical role. At home, Latino children have traditionally been nurtured by a large number of relatives and friends. However, direct parental involvement in their children schools' or in school activities has neither been expected nor encouraged. As Morton Inger has commented, the American educational

system has failed to take advantage of the multiple strengths offered by Latino families, especially those low-income families where the parents are still not fluent in the English language (Inger, 1992).

Some authors, such as Portes and Bach (1985), have highlighted the role played by family networks to recent arrivals by sharing with them their experiences, by providing them with footholds, and by helping relatives in solving a variety of logistical problems. Latino families play a pivotal role in networks of communication, socialization, distribution of resources, preservation of cultural forms, and immigrant resettlement. This is due to such factors as their internal dynamics, resilience, and mutability. On the gender side, for example, out of economic necessity, a growing number of Latino women are now participating in the labor force, often due to the fact that their husbands hold poorly paid, disadvantaged positions. Also, as a result of divorce or separation, women currently head a growing number of Latino families, as is also the case in other segments of the American society.

One of the biggest challenges that school divisions with a large Latino enrollment face is how to increase Latino parental involvement. There are neither easy solutions nor quick fixes. Traditional recruitment efforts, such as massive mailings or inviting parents to get involved in existing PTAs, are ineffective and must change to include culturally sensitive recruitment strategies. Learning more about the specific interests and needs of Latino parents often requires a more personalized approach. These may include home visits by school staff where teachers and administrators learn the parents' particular needs and views. Minority parents usually require the greatest assistance with baby-sitting while attending meetings, transportation, and the use of the Spanish language. Often, school agendas do not coincide with these needs or school systems are ignorant of minority parents' agenda.

Further research is needed in understanding how Latino families, especially those which immigrated to the United States from war-torn countries such as El Salvador or Guatemala, cope with such issues as educational attainment, social mobility, health, and community development. An additional issue that must be taken into consideration is how refugee children and adults who have been exposed to traumatic events, threatened with death, or brought into contact with murder, are coping with resultant anxieties.

Today, many Latino youngsters live in circumstances very different from those in which their parents grew up. Often these students desperately need adult mentors who will understand their emotional and psychological needs and provide them with positive role models. This becomes particularly challenging when Latino students do not see other Latinos "who have made it" in America. Furthermore, some youngsters become resentful of their cultural background and may eventually even feel ashamed of their parents who are struggling to survive in America.

Many children of recently immigrated, low-income Latino families are "on their own" during after-school hours. These youngsters are often surrendered to an unsupervised, alien, and, at times hostile, environment. To address these needs, schools serving a large percentage of very poor Latino families may need to move toward a community-oriented pedagogy and employ the often untapped resources offered by the Latino families, especially their extended families, together with local churches and a number of grassroots community organizations. After-school programs that provide safe and positive environments and that focus on students' strengths and successes do make a difference.

Review of the Literature

An analysis of the implementation of the Empowering Families Through Literacy project utilized the sociocultural approach to literacy as well as the social constructivist model inspired in the theories of Soviet psychologist Vygotsky (1978) in the early 1930s, the community development and empowerment theories proposed by Freire (1970, 1992), and the instructional recommendations offered by Collier (1987,1995a, 1995b), Cummins (1986, 1989), Dalton (1998), Dalton & Moir (1992), Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b), Moll (1988, 1992), Tharp (1997), and Tharp et al. (2000).

The social constructivist model assumes all knowledge is social in nature and that learning occurs in a context of social interactions leading to understanding. Learners are active risk takers who accept challenges and understand how and why to learn. Since learning is not an isolated act of cognition but a social practice by which an individual gains entry to a discourse of practitioners through the *mediation* of teachers and peers, students are given opportunities to "construct" and restructure information in ways that make sense to them. They achieve this by connecting and processing with previously known information. This process generates questions and comments, which helps students move through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by working closely with the assistance of teachers or peers.

Several decades later, Freire (1970) also argued that the interaction between teacher and students did not occur in a vacuum but in a complex social context. Like Vygotsky, Freire believed that development could not be separated from its social context since the social context profoundly influences how and what learners think; that all individuals constructed knowledge (i.e., did not passively reproduce what was presented to each of them); and that the learning had a great impact over the developmental process, therefore, the tremendous responsibility that educators had in assisting all learners to use strategies that would further their intellectual capacities.

Following a sociocultural perspective, learning is an empowering and transformational process grounded in a broader theory of possibilities. It encourages students and their teachers to find meaning and purpose in their sociohistorical environment. To be successful, it has to be the result of a social and collaborative activity, not one directed exclusively by a teacher or students.

Education, as Freire and many other educational philosophers including John Dewey have reminded us, must be an enterprise of freedom, democracy, liberation, dialogue, and hope. It involves a gradual unfolding of the students' language ability and their ability to learn by critically examining their world and, by doing so, recognizing and solving contemporary problems (op. cit). He strongly believed that by empowering all students with a sense of hope and possibility, and by counteracting the effects of a psychology of oppression, education could improve the human condition. Since schools are part of a larger social world, Freire urged teachers and educators to look beyond the classroom walls and extend into the lives and struggles of the communities in which they work.

Searching for a way to boost the literacy skills of poor, mostly Latino students, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Luis Moll (1988, 1992) proposed a sociocultural approach to literacy instruction. For him, classroom practices often underestimate and constrain what Latino students are able to display intellectually. Therefore, educational institutions must investigate and tap into the "funds of knowledge," or the hidden family and community resources of their students that educators often do not know about and use in their classrooms. Moll's interdisciplinary research confirms that the Latino community has enormous untapped resources for educational change and improvement (Moll et al., 1992; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994).

Recent developments in multicultural education, as Garcia (1999), hooks (1994), Ladson-Billings (1994a, 1994b), and Tharp (1997, 2000) have highlighted, offer us positive lessons to apply with culturally and linguistically diverse students. These authors suggest that linguistically and culturally diverse students can achieve academic success when provided with appropriate instruction tailored to meet their specific needs. Good teachers, which Ladson-Billings refers to as cultural relevant teachers, are those who advocate what hooks calls engaged pedagogy. Echoing the work of Freire (1970, 1997, 1998), these teachers seek to empower students by using cultural references, sources of strength, and their ideals. They are committed to changing the way of teaching by encouraging their students to critique, question, and use personal experiences to create a classroom environment where everyone can learn. One of the prerequisites of a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994a) or engaged (hooks, 1994) pedagogical environment

is for the teachers to understand their students' backgrounds and to be willing to build a bridge between students' home and school communities. In doing so, these authors challenge monocultural and culturally irrelevant pedagogy and encourage a critical learning environment that empowers students and teachers to transgress boundaries and transform the world.

One of the challenges faced by systemic education reform efforts lies in teaching teachers to translate rigorous standards and innovative pedagogy for all their students, including culturally and linguistically diverse students. Over the past decade, valuable work has been done to identify and review successful programs that prepare teachers.

The sociocultural perspectives and social constructivist approach fully supports and complements recent research findings on second language acquisition. As will be discussed later, research conducted by Collier (1987,1995a, 1995b), Collier & Thomas (1997), and Cummins (1986, 1989) have highlighted that cognitive and academic development in the native language has a positive effect on English development since reading instruction in the students' native language develops a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency that is strongly related to the development of English literacy. By valuing their native language knowledge, this approach empowers language minority families by building upon their funds of knowledge.

Research Question

How can American school systems engage culturally and diverse student populations, who are speakers of languages other than English, and capitalize on their sociocultural strengths?

To understand the motivations, orientation, and aspirations of a culturally diverse immigrant community requires recognition of what they value and of the assets they are most inclined to engage. Furthermore, realities such as illiteracy and extreme poverty must be taken into consideration as they bear directly upon the success of any educational endeavor. An appropriate source for acquiring the necessary perspective to answer these challenges lies in the community itself. As an example of praxis, community reflection and insight can be crucial to the initiation and success of community-based educational efforts.

A Case Study

This study addresses educational challenges currently faced by an important segment of the Latino K-12 student population—the relatively recently arrived Salvadoran immigrants and their offspring. As a result of the 1979-1992 civil war that practically destroyed El Salvador, over 1 million people

fled that country. Most came to the United States. Of these, more than 200,000 chose the greater Washington metropolitan area as their new home.

Neither the Salvadoran refugees nor the American public schools, cities, or counties were prepared to deal with the unexpected challenges. As in all refugee situations, there was no time for planning. Those who came to the nation's capital were mostly very poor Spanish-speaking refugees who fled isolated rural areas located in the nation's *Zona Oriental* (eastern region) where formal education was not always readily available or a priority. Many were illiterate or functionally illiterate in Spanish. Their transition from El Salvador to the greater Washington metropolitan area was abrupt. Figuratively speaking, most of these children or their parents were directly "helicoptered" from their rural, isolated Salvadoran villages to one of the most complex cosmopolitan areas of the United States.

For the public schools in the greater Washington metropolitan area, the sudden influx of Salvadoran students posed tremendous challenges. One of these implied the need to transform an educational system traditionally designed to serve a predominantly white middle-class student population into one that could educate and empower the children of these recently arrived very poor Spanish-speaking families and guarantee their academic success in the American educational system.

Historical Background: The 12-Year Civil War (1979–1982)

In 1979 the Salvadoran 12-year civil war exploded, and the largest migratory wave in Salvadoran history began. One-fifth of the Salvadoran population left the country, and most of the refugees fled to the United States. Of the estimated 1 million-plus Salvadorans currently living in the United States, some 90% arrived after 1979. The 1980s were one of the most violent periods in Salvadoran history. Between 1980 and 1983, an average of 20 Salvadorans were killed every day by the military or by death squads. Arlington County, Virginia, as several other jurisdictions in the United States (cf. Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago), opened its doors and housed tens of thousands of Salvadorans who had fled their war-torn country. The early arrivals told stories of citizens kidnapped and "disappeared" by the so-called "security forces" and massacres of hundreds of peasants. These reports incited thousands of U.S. citizens to participate in solidarity actions. Arlington County and its neighboring jurisdictions took part in one of the largest Salvadoran refugee waves from its *Zona Oriental*, an area of dire poverty that experienced fierce war during the early 1980s.

The vast majority of the Salvadorans who came to Arlington during the 1980s and early 1990s were either political or economic refugees fleeing from rural areas. Individuals rather than families fled. Young male adults were the first to leave out of fear of being forced to serve either in the military or in the

opposing camps. Children were left behind with relatives until their parents saved enough money to bring them over, a process that often took many years. Later, families slowly became reunited in Arlington.

Nearly all of those who came during the 1980s came by land, experiencing long and dangerous journeys through Guatemala and Mexico to the United States. Few of them spoke English and, as most refugees, they arrived to Arlington with few possessions and often lacking legal documents. Many who came had never lived in an urban environment. Almost all had experienced a war and had been directly exposed to different types of violent events such as murders, kidnappings, or political torture. Bringing with them the scars from these traumas and often alone, they had to quickly adjust to a radically different life and culture without adequate preparation and resources.

The arrival of the Salvadoran refugees was immediately felt in Arlington. From a demographic point of view, U.S. Census data report that during the 1980s Arlington's Latin American population increased by 163%, while the county's overall population only increased by 12% (Arlington County, Virginia, 1991a). During the 1980s, three out of four *net* new residents to Arlington were of Latin American origin; one-third of them came from El Salvador. Arlington soon became the Commonwealth of Virginia's jurisdiction with the largest number of immigrant children and youth.

In 2000, Salvadorans continued being the largest Latino group in Arlington. On average, they were younger than other county residents and were more likely to live in larger households with children and other family members (Arlington County, Virginia, 1991b). This is particularly important in a county where 81% of the residents do not have school-age children.

Participants

The profile of most of the Salvadoran adults currently living in Arlington includes the following characteristics: (a) adults with less than six years of schooling and currently not enrolled in an adult education program, (b) limited English proficiency (LEP), (c) working two or three jobs, and (d) difficulty meeting various survival needs on a daily basis (e.g., housing, food, transportation, literacy, working conditions, medical insurance). A significant number of these adults have U.S.-born children enrolled in an Arlington Public School. In 1997 the school system identified 433 Spanish-speaking parents with children enrolled in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program who had not gone beyond the fifth grade of school. Several of these parents were either illiterate or functionally illiterate in Spanish and did not speak English.

From a geographic viewpoint, Arlington's Latino population is unevenly distributed. The 1990 Census figures suggest that most Latinos live in 11 of the county's 39 census tracks. These 11 census tracks are located in South Arlington. In two of these 11 census tracks, Latinos represented more than 35% of the population (Arlington County, Virginia, 1991b).

In 1998, some 43% of Arlington's students came from homes where a language other than English was spoken. Limited English proficient students came from 96 different countries of origin and spoke 70 different languages. The five major native countries of these students were the United States (52%), El Salvador (12.7%), Bolivia (6.4%), Ethiopia (2.8%), and Somalia (1.8%). More than 70% of these language-minority students were Spanish speakers (Arlington Public Schools, 1996).

Another effect of these demographic changes is the fact that Arlington schools are increasingly becoming economically and educationally bimodal. One segment of the student population comes from high-income, highly educated families, while the other can be categorized as low income with low educational backgrounds. As an example, I would like to briefly describe two of the county's neighborhood schools.

Glencarlyn Elementary School is located in the Columbia Heights West neighborhood, one of the two poorest census tracks in Arlington. Overall, this neighborhood is characterized by the high percentage of families living in poverty, by its large minority and immigrant population, by its limited English proficiency, and by the poor academic levels of its student population. This neighborhood elementary school, with its 560 students, is the most diverse school in the county from an ethnic point of view: 55% of its students are Latino, 19% Black (i.e., African immigrants or African Americans), 18% Asian, and 8% White. Some 85% of the student population is eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 55% of them are enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) classes (Arlington Public Schools, 1996).

These figures contrast dramatically with those of another elementary school, Jamestown, located almost six miles north. This neighborhood, with its 527 students, is perhaps, from an ethnic point of view, among the most homogeneous in the county. At this school, 90% of the student population is White, 5% Latino, 5% Asian, and 0.4% Black. Some 2% of its students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 1% of them are enrolled in ESL classes (Arlington Public Schools, 1996).

Unique Problems: Our Educational Challenge

Currently, over 1,500 students of Salvadoran ancestry are enrolled in Arlington Public schools. Their presence alone constitutes a tremendous challenge both to the students and their families, as well as to the school system. Paraphrasing Nan Henderson, educators should approach these language minority students with an attitude of optimism, strength-identification, and strength-building (Henderson, 1996). Therefore, there is a need to take into consideration the special characteristics of this student population and adapt the school system to better serve their needs.

Considering that most of these families came from rural areas that traditionally had limited formal educational opportunities, enrollment in Arlington schools also meant a major change in their children's lives. At our schools, these youngsters suddenly found themselves in an environment where almost all teachers, students, and administrators spoke, dressed, and acted in a very different way. Therefore, the students' self-esteem and well-being were challenged from the outset. The beginning of their American school experience often also coincided with their family reunification, after being left in El Salvador for many years with their grandparents, friends or relatives while their parents earned enough money for their trip.

Reunited Families

Family reunification has become a fairly common, although traumatic, experience in the lives of many Salvadoran students. Due to a number of reasons, finances being one of them, entire families did not leave together. Usually the father was the first to flee, leaving the wife and children back home. Once settled in the United States, he would begin sending funds to bring the other family members here one by one. This process took many years. During these years, many adults got divorced and built new families.

Children who were left behind in the village often did not fully understand the reasons why their parents had left them. Like most rural dwellers, they also witnessed civil war casualties, including the tragic deaths of close relatives and acquaintances. During years of separation, youngsters tried to cope while they continued living in small communal jurisdictions, usually with their grandparents or guardians and other members of extended families. Communication with their parents in the United States often fueled unrealistic expectations about their future life in America.

The entire process of family reunification traumatized many of these children. The trip alone, traveling with professional border smugglers (locally know as *coyotes)* who helped them cross Guatemala and Mexico all the way to the United States, became a highly stressful event, often intensified by a

feeling of insecurity. Upon arrival to their Arlington home, they often found themselves in an alien family environment. In addition to becoming reacquainted with their parents, on occasions they found that they had built new families. Furthermore, their parents were rarely home, since most of the adults in the household simultaneously held two or three menial, low paying service jobs.

Housing in Arlington was and continues to be stressful for these newcomers. Due to the high cost of living, Salvadoran families usually settled in substandard, often overcrowded apartments or subdivided house units that they shared with other adults (relatives or acquaintances). As indicated earlier, Salvadorans in Arlington tend to be concentrated in two census tracks. In addition to living in an impersonal metropolitan area, youngsters soon had to learn how to interact with members of other ethnic and racial groups.

Reversal of Parent-Child Roles

One of the biggest challenges experienced by Salvadoran families living in the United States is the reversal of parent-child roles. As indicated earlier, the majority of the adults who arrived in the Arlington area had either limited or no formal education and spoke no English. A few hundred of them acknowledged being illiterate both in Spanish and English. Adults also had to devote their entire time to work and making ends-meet.

At school and in the community, Salvadoran children learned the English language faster than their parents. Thanks to their bilingual and literacy skills, these children began to fill an important communication void in their mostly monolingual households. In this role, the children often read, translated, or interpreted correspondence among schools, landlords, and other sectors of their American society.

Among some traditional Salvadoran families, a different set of problems developed when their children became increasingly socialized in American middle-class cultural mores while their parents continued to run their house according to old traditions. Generational disagreements became exacerbated with language differences and cultural issues, for example, dress codes, dating, acceptable constraints and privileges, and desire to live independently.

Empowering Families Through Literacy (EFTL) Program

In 1996 a group of volunteer Latino professionals launched a family literacy program in Arlington. The Empowering Families Through Literacy program is a multifaceted program that works with entire Latino families—teaching illiterate or functionally illiterate adult immigrants literacy and arithmetic skills in Spanish, while at the same time providing tutoring and enrichment activities for their children.

Working with a minimal budget, the project is sponsored by an Arlington chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), George Mason University, Arlington Public Schools, and the Mexican embassy. EFTL offers two hours of instruction at a community center on Saturday mornings. During the past years, an average of 10 families at a time benefited from the program.

The program recognizes the link between undereducated adults and educationally at-risk children. It targets a segment of the language minority population that has traditionally not participated in more conventional programs serving Spanish-speaking immigrants with limited formal education. Some of the program's main features include dynamic family involvement, flexibility, attunement to immigrant family needs, and a strong focus on improving the literacy skills of Spanish-speaking immigrants living in an English language environment.

Adult Latinos 18 years or older, with children attending Arlington Public Schools, constitute the target population. Because the vast majority of parents with limited literacy skills have not yet learned the English language or do not speak English fluently, these adults have less access to state and local conventional English literacy programs.

Origins of the Program

Three years ago a group of Latino parents brought attention to the Educational Council of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) that one of the main barriers Latino families encounter with local public schools is not only their limited English language fluency, but also their limited literacy skills. Based on a needs assessment, through informal interviews conducted by George Mason University faculty and Arlington Public School teachers (volunteers helping immigrant Spanish-speaking adults with limited educational background), parents expressed the urgent need for literacy classes taught by bilingual teachers. They wanted to improve their reading and writing skills, learn to complete forms, and as one parent expressed, "to learn how to write their children's names." Other surveys determined that at least 450 Spanish-speaking parents in the Arlington public school system (over 18,000 students) acknowledged having very limited, if any, formal education. It was determined that many school parents could not read at all in Spanish, much less in English. Furthermore, their busy schedules—often holding two or three jobs—severely restricted their ability to enroll in any adult education classes.

These literacy figures came as a surprise to many community and educational leaders. Arlington is known for its quality public schools, for having a highly educated population, and in 1998 for having a more than $9,300 per pupil annual school expenditure. Likewise, county figures suggest

that more than 50% of Arlington residents are college graduates and over 25% of these hold advanced degrees. It is in this context that the Empowering Families Through Literacy program was designed.

EFTL's Goals and its Experiential Learning Methodology

The project portrays adult students as individuals who, despite lacking formal schooling, have been "informally" educated by many life experiences and bring to the classroom a fully developed language system. The project has multiple effects. It prepares and motivates parents to become more effective learners and productive citizens. Also, parents who attend school themselves are more likely to promote literacy activities to their children and to take greater interest in what happens at school. The project also helps parents with children attending public schools to increase their awareness of the American educational, cultural and political realities in which they currently live. This provides the opportunity to model the learning behavior for their children, while simultaneously improving their own lives, as well as their children's.

Using a participatory curriculum, the project's goal is to help adult students learn how to read and write in Spanish and to assist them in making the transition to English literacy within the first two years. The provision of age-appropriate academic enrichment opportunities to their children constitutes an important element. While the adult sessions take place, their school-age children are tutored at three distinct levels (e.g., preschool, elementary, and secondary levels) in the same facility.

A 15-year, ongoing, nationwide longitudinal study on language minority populations conducted by Thomas and Collier (1995a, 1995b, 1997, 1997/1998) has confirmed that one of the key predictors of academic success is the student's academic instruction using her/his first language for as long as possible, followed by cognitive complex academic instruction in English. These findings reinforce our approach when teaching Latino adults with a limited formal educational background as well as a limited background in the English language. Therefore, by teaching parents how to read and write *initially* in their mother tongue, the EFTL program *later* teaches these language minority adults immigrants how to read and write in English as a second language. The program also promotes parental support for Latino children to achieve higher academic standards in Arlington.

The lessons learned in Latin American popular education programs, especially those inspired by the theories of Freire, have provided the EFTL instructors with several insights. All students are active participants in the classroom dynamics. Based on an initial needs assessment, the adult literacy curriculum is geared to the learner's desires, necessities, and limitations. All sessions incorporate a listening and dialogue phase. This enables the

instructor, while dialoguing with the students, to identify critical social issues in the students' lives while simultaneously allowing the students to support each other in addressing their daily challenges and improving their literacy skills.

Hunter College sociologist John L. Hammond, who taught literacy to Salvadoran peasants in the midst of that nation's civil war, and who currently teaches graduate students at the City University of New York, has identified a number of important lessons for American educators. He highlights how the poor setting of education in economically depressed rural areas located in a war zone creates a great instructional opportunity. In his view, the success of the Salvadoran popular educational experiences was due to the fact that these teachers—many of them without formal education—tailored their curriculum and methods to promote learning in circumstances of poverty and conflict. These teachers, making intensive use of the dialogical method, also encouraged the active participation of students in the classroom and assisted them in the development of a critical consciousness. Popular schools were also dependent on the active support of their communities, which allowed anyone, whatever their level of knowledge and intellectual skill, to learn.

Adult Students

All of the parents who have participated in the EFTL program are middle-aged, low-income adults with serious family and job responsibilities. Some of them acknowledged a few years of ineffective elementary education in their rural communities, which was interrupted for various reasons. One or two decades later and now living in the United States, these same individuals decided to enroll in the EFTL literacy program despite their hectic lives.

One of the first challenges faced by the EFTL instructors was to provide these adult students and their children with a sense of possibility. For these highly motivated families, their participation in the literacy program meant a new start in their formal educational process.

Illiterate parents brought to the classroom years of knowledge, skills, and experience, which, when properly identified by their instructors, helped to enrich their learning process. The acknowledgment, celebration, and value of the students' culture, knowledge, and experiences filled a number of functions. It provided the instructor with great opportunities to actively engage in the educational process while boosting the students motivation and morale. Several challenges remained, such as helping the students develop study routines and successful habits.

The García Family: A Refugee Story

Since the beginning of the EFTL family literacy program, José García's family has been one of the most enthusiastic participants. Born in El Salvador's *Zona Oriental* (eastern region) in 1950, his family worked in agriculture. As a child, his parents moved to neighboring Honduras, where they worked for 10 years as sharecroppers until the 1969 Honduras-Salvadoran "Soccer War" broke out and forced them to return to their village. As a peasant, José had limited opportunities to attend school and was expected to help his parents work in the fields. He never learned how to read and write in Spanish.

At the age of 19, José married a fellow villager and together they raised a family of four boys and a girl. They settled in their home village. Ten years later in 1979, the bloody 12-year civil war broke out in El Salvador. Despite living fairly close to a military base, the bloodshed hit home and both the guerrilla and the Salvadoran army forcefully began raising troops by conscripting all able bodied men. The search of local houses for food and weapons also became rampant. His home was searched several times. Life, especially for all able-bodied men, became increasingly dangerous.

That same year, while the guerrilla forces were holding a public meeting near his home, the military forces broke in. The fire exchange killed five bystanders and forced everybody to flee or seek shelter. The military tied the hands and feet of the corpses to a pole and forced José and a few other villagers to carry them to the cemetery. This experience alone heavily traumatized him, along with the fear of compulsory enrollment either by military or guerrilla services.

Fleeing war-torn El Salvador

Together with a group of 12 close male relatives, José decided to flee to the United States. None of them spoke English. These were the years of President Ronald Reagan's Central American policy. They were aware that in the United States, border immigration officials usually deported refugees from countries the administration supported like El Salvador and Guatemala. However, they were also cognizant that in the United States, over 500 religious congregations had begun a refugee advocacy network inspired on the antebellum underground railroad for escaped slaves. The group was informed that one of these religious refugee sanctuaries, Casa Romero, was located near the Brownsville, Texas border·

Due to the lack of economic resources, and the uncertainties of a long trip, his wife, together with their five children, remained in the village. During the rest of the civil war years, their children attended what was left of a poorly equipped and understaffed elementary school located half a mile from their home.

Like most Salvadoran refugees, because they lacked money and proper legal documents, José's group decided to make the long trip by land. That meant crossing war-torn Guatemala as well as Mexico. Not knowing the area, and fearing for their lives, the group decided to hire a professional border smuggler in Guatemala to surreptitiously help them cross both countries and reach the Matamoros-Brownsville border area. Once at the Mexican-U.S. border, the group discovered that the U.S. government would deny them political asylum or refugee status. But if they crossed the border, members of any religious refugee sanctuary would assist them in finding safety in the United States. José's group swam across the Rio Grande at midnight, was arrested by the U.S. Border patrol, and detained for one week, before being released to Casa Romero. They remained in Casa Romero for over a month, doing menial jobs and saving enough money for their trip to the East Coast.

In April 1985, with the economic assistance of a relative living in Arlington, the five cousins flew there. Once on the East Coast, José stayed with a distant Salvadoran relative and promptly found a job as a dishwasher. He worked long hours to save enough to pay his loans, as well as to send monies to cover for his family's expenses back home. He lived under the permanent threat of deportation. In 1986, with new legislation and his boss's help, he was initially found eligible for the Extended Voluntary Status bill, and a few months later for the November 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (i.e., Public Law 99-603). In accordance with that law, he was among the 150,000 Salvadorans who were granted permanent residency.

Family reunification

Once a legal resident, José decided to begin bringing his wife and five children to the United States. Once again confronted by the lack of funds, passports and, visas, José initially opted to travel to El Salvador almost every year. It would take 11 years for the entire family to be reunited in Arlington.

During the process, in 1990, Guerrilla forces attempted to forcibly recruit his two eldest children. He instructed them to leave El Salvador immediately and travel to Arlington, which they did, just as their father had done, by land.

In Arlington, both teenagers joined their father in the crowded apartment he shared with other Salvadoran refugees. Immediately they discovered that José, like the other refugees, had to work two or more low-income jobs. All adults left in the morning and returned late at night. Nobody had time to enroll in an adult education class, much less to study English.

Soon after their arrival, the teenagers were enrolled in the neighborhood public high school. With limited English skills, they found themselves unwelcome, despite the fact that their high school had a large number of refugee students. They were homesick, missed their mother and other relatives, and not engaged by school. They soon discovered that even in the cafeteria,

students voluntarily grouped themselves by ethnicity or nationality. Salvadoran youngsters had limited interaction with other Latino students, such as the Bolivians and Peruvians, and seldom socialized with non-Hispanic whites and African Americans students.

Finally, after an 11-year separation, the entire García family was living in the United States. In 1996, his wife, together with their remaining children, flew directly from San Salvador to the Washington, DC, area. They all traveled with passports and immigrant U.S. visas. In Arlington, they joined the rest of their family in a two-bedroom condo that José had purchased together with his married son. The newcomers—mother and three children—soon discovered the language barrier and had to deal with the rapid acculturation to American lifestyles. It is in this context that the García family enrolled in the Empowering Families Through Literacy program.

Conclusions

Moving Beyond Invisibility

Moving beyond invisibility will require Latino students, including the children of Salvadoran refugees, to benefit from quality educational programs that acknowledge, celebrate, and develop their creativity. Considering the fact that many refugee parents have little formal education and usually speak a language other than English at home, what chances do their children have to succeed at our public schools?

Although most refugee and immigrant Latino children, including those who come from very poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, can rise to challenges, they must have help if they are to succeed.

The Irish poet William B. Yeats wrote, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Paraphrasing him, we may suggest that in order to motivate, to “ignite” our refugee, migrant, and immigrant student population, our public schools must understand the children’s cultural heritage and determine which are the best ways to teach these students; they may need to adjust their approaches, methods, and curriculum without lowering their high academic expectations. The children need help to come up to speed with their classmates. All this is necessary since we are working with children and families where the “educational playing field” is not “level.”

To improve the academic performance of Latino refugees, students should become one of our highest priorities. Learning does not take place in a social vacuum. It takes place in a social, political, and psychological context. Students must care about their schools. This will be facilitated in a school environment where youngsters are actively engaged in learning and where trust and respect

have become an integral component of their classrooms. Lewin's meta-theory of thinking suggested that learning, as a type of human behavior, results from the interaction between student's perceptions and the educational approaches used by our educators. To do this effectively will mean acknowledging and considering the experiences and intrinsic cultural characteristics of these immigrant populations.

Most Latino refugee students, despite their past traumatic experiences, are ambitious, resilient, and diligent about learning English. They care about their studies. The overwhelming challenge is how to learn the English language without compromising their academics. To succeed, schools must tailor their pedagogical techniques to what works best for these youngsters while assisting them in linking their previous knowledge and experiences—in making connections—to their new knowledge. This may become a particular challenge to those teachers educating children whose parents had to flee the horrors of civil strife.

When educating refugee children, local and regional school authorities must also ask themselves what their long-term educational goals and perspectives are. This is particularly important, since as Univerity of California, Berkeley, chancellor Berdahl recently suggested, the process of who will go to college begins in elementary school, in first grade, and not when a student graduates from high school and applies to college. The importance of keeping a long-term perspective in the educational process was initially suggested almost a century ago by John Dewey (1902/1990) in his classic, *The Child in the Curriculum*, when he asked:

> Of what use, educationally speaking, is it to be able to see the end in the beginning? How does it assist us in dealing with the early stages of growth to be able to anticipate its later phases? To see the outcome is to know in what direction the present experience is moving, provided it moves normally and soundly. The far-away point, which is of no significance to us simply as far away, becomes of huge importance the moment we take it as defining a present direction of movement. Taken in this way it is no remote and distant result to be achieved, but a guiding method in dealing with the present. (p. 191)

Arlington's Empowering Families Through Literacy program addresses some of these new challenges, that is, the educational needs of poor, LEP Latino refugee families with inadequate literacy related knowledge and skills. It teaches parents how to read and write, while simultaneously providing their children with additional practice in reading. Although highly motivated to learn how to read and write, none of these families had access to literacy-stimulating preschool experiences. Furthermore, due to the long working hours of both parents, their children often return to empty apartments where there is no parent available to help them.

Increased parental involvement in the educational process is a major EFTL goal. As schools become increasingly diverse, many new immigrant parents, especially those who are not fluent in English, do not feel at ease while attending teacher-parent conferences or PTA meetings with longtime residents. Teachers need more than just translation help. In order to influence the lives of each child, especially the children of limited English-speaking refugees, educators must work more closely with minority families and help them create the most positive setting possible for their children to succeed. While interpreters and school outreach officers are essential in parent-teacher conferences and in public meetings, it is essential to develop alternative ways to improve parents' access to schools, such as home visits or scheduled meetings (e.g., before school, after school, weekends). Any school information or materials sent home should, whenever possible, be written in the family's home language. Together, these policies will help narrow the existing gap between immigrant families and their public schools.

As in most educational programs, the knowledge and skills of the families (adults and children) participating in the EFTL program are very diverse. While the majority are very poor and share a linguistic and cultural background, diversity exists here too. While some live in print-free environments, we did have an adult student whose eldest son was a Roman Catholic priest serving at a Maryland parish. The level of English fluency among these families also varies. While in a few cases some children are registered at their neighborhood schools without knowing a word of English, most EFTL children know some English but need additional help to succeed in school.

In closing, moving beyond invisibility will require that schools and communities promote positive attitudes and behaviors among Latino students. Communities and schools must provide youngsters with a caring, encouraging, and safe environment, and help them become optimistic about their personal future. However, due to a number of factors, our schools continue to treat minority student achievement ineffectively. These students and their families often get blamed for their educational deficiencies. To reverse this situation, as Cummins has argued, educational stakeholders must undergo the difficult task of redefining their approaches, methods, and roles, not only in the classroom, but also in their dealings with their local communities as well as with the society at large. They must focus more on positive issues, such as the creative ways that these youngsters have responded to the hardships and opportunities or which have been their main academic and non-academic accomplishments, rather than focusing on their deficiencies and limitations. Building trust and working to instill confidence in their abilities and their prospects for a better future will provide the foundation for cultivating creative, critical thinkers.

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