INVOLVING HISPANIC PARENTS IN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES THROUGH COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Alicia Salinas Sosa
University of Texas at San Antonio

Research In Practice

ABSTRACT

This article is based on a literature review of school districts' successful practices in involving Hispanic parents, particularly migrant and immigrant parents, in their children's school activities. It presents a brief overview of the tradition of parental involvement, followed by a force field analysis of factors, which facilitate or hinder the involvement in education of this population. Finally, the author presents promising practices which result in higher levels of involvement and, most importantly, foster positive relationships.

You may have overheard school personnel express concerns about the low participation level of Hispanic parents in school activities. Lack of participation may stem from dissonance-parents' beliefs and expectations vary from those of the schools and those parents traditionally engaged in the public schools. A literature review was conducted in response to several school districts seeking appropriate strategies for involving Hispanic families. This article explores some of the basic misunderstandings; provides a different way of looking at the challenge of involving Hispanic parents, particularly those who may be migrant or immigrants; and presents strategies that resulted in successful experiences with these parents.

THE TRADITION OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Involving parents in their children's education and in educational decision-making is a relatively new activity in public schools in the United States. During early efforts to involve parents in education (in the early Twentieth Century), schools saw parents as agents of service for the school rather than as equal partners in the educational endeavor (Bermudez, 1994). Schools determined the areas for assistance and how parents would assist.

When federal initiatives required parent involvement as an integral part of new grant applications, schools placed a renewed emphasis on parental involvement. Ascher (1987) defines parental involvement as a range of activities from promoting the value of education in the home to the actual role of team decision-maker in policy, curriculum and instructional issues. According to Ascher (1987), parents can participate at various levels, including taking advocacy roles: sitting on councils and committees, participating in the decisions and operation of schools. Parents can serve as classroom aides, can accompany a class on a field trip or assist teachers in a variety of other ways. More recently, parent involvement includes parents initiating learning activities at home to improve their children's performance in school: for example, reading to them, helping them with homework, playing educational games, or discussing current events. Clearly, parent involvement is now seen as greater than parents participating in the "bake sale".

BARRIERS TO MIGRANT/IMMIGRANT PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In addition to the barriers imposed by beliefs and expectations, forces exist in the day-to-day demands of living which affect parental participation, in either negative or positive ways. Henderson, Marburger and Ooms (1986) categorized barriers to successful parental involvement into two major categories: logistical and attitudinal. Villarreal and Barnwell (1990) added expectations as a third category of barriers.

LOGISTICAL BARRIERS

Logistical barriers include time, money, safety child care concerns, and segmentation of programs.

TIME

Time for participating in school activities is a barrier since often both parents work. In the case of migrant families, parents and relatives/siblings may be working a long distance (several miles) away from the school.

MONEY

Recent migrant and immigrant families may be experiencing intense financial pressures and working long hours doing physically exhausting labor. Parents who work very hard to provide the bare essentials for their families find that their children's schooling negatively affects the daily income intake which remains at the extreme poverty level (Chavkin, 1991). This concern is an additional stressor associated with schooling.

SAFETY

Depending on the location of the school(s), improperly lit campuses in inner-city or rural communities may deter participation in activities, especially those held at night.

CHILD CARE

Making child care arrangements becomes more difficult for migrant families and recent immigrants when they no longer have an extended family to support them through free baby sitting services. Being recent arrivals to a community, they often have not made close, trusting friendships; these develop over time.

SEGMENTATION OF PROGRAMS

The segmented nature of public education, where different programs target varying populations, makes it difficult to facilitate family-wide learning programs (Orum & Navarrete, 1990). Families may travel to one campus to enroll a child in pre-kindergarten, the mother's English as a second language class may be scheduled in another building, while health services are located in another part of town.

ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS

Attitudinal barriers include uncertainty about roles, anxiety about how they are being perceived, disagreements regarding educational policies, dissatisfaction with their own home involvement, and communication problems.

UNCERTAINTY

Parents are unsure of their role in U.S. public schools. Parents who have been educated in other countries view educators with high regard and defer to their experience/professional development in questions regarding their own children's best interests (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Navarrette (1996) reports that while parents understand the importance of homework, they may not realize the academic importance of everyday activities like children talking to adult members of the family, reading and writing for fun, playing board games, or participating in sports. Azmitia et al. (1994) found that although parents held high aspirations for their children, parents had varying amounts of information about how to help them attain these aspirations. While some parents were aware that school grades were important, none of the parents who hoped their children would become doctors, lawyers, and teachers was aware that these professions require a graduate education.

DISSATISFACTION

Being dissatisfied over their own capability to carry out home involvement activities, such as helping their children with their homework, reading to them in English and establishing routines, may prevent parents from engaging in such home teaching activities. Applying disciplinary actions related to cooperation with home learning activities also poses a problem. Azmitia et al. (1994) reported that 25% of parents indicated that they could not help directly with their older children's homework because of their limited schooling or English. Parents helped by checking with them to see that they had completed the assigned homework or by enlisting the help of an older sibling. However, according to Azmitia et al. (1994), conflicts sometimes arose when adolescents, busy with their own homework, balked because of added work from helping younger siblings. Research by Casas, Furlong, Carranza, & Solberg (1986) [cited in Minicucci & Olsen, 1993] showed that while Anglo students sought help from their parents, Mexican American youth sought help from siblings.

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

Parents sense that the school is establishing a distance between them when school personnel use educational jargon in their communications. According to Nicolau and Ramos (1990, 13), many low-income Hispanic parents view the school system as, "a bureaucracy governed by educated non Hispanics whom they have no right to question."

EXPECTATIONS BARRIERS

These barriers are perceived when parents feel themselves judged by their occupation, economic status, group membership (ethnicity or social class). Oftentimes schools expect a certain level of minimum participation of all parents, without regard for recency of arrival. Yet recent arrivals to this country may have to meet specific personal needs of a very pressing nature, such as clearing up questions about immigration status (Commins, 1992); finding adequate, affordable housing in a safe neighborhood; seeking help for trauma or experiencing culture shock (Carrasquillo & London, 1993; Violand-Sánchez, Sutton & Ware, 1991).

This description of the forces hindering participation in schools may seem overwhelming to begin to address. However, it is important to note that not all these are present in any one site at all times. Rather, the description of barriers is provided to note the following: (1) factors do exist that detract, inhibit or deter parents from school involvement; (2) it is the school's responsibility to ascertain which of these factors are present in the lives of their school's Hispanic parents and recognize them as legitimate concerns; and (3) school staff must take action to minimize the hindering forces.

FACILITATING/SUPPORTING INVOLVEMENT OF HISPANIC MIGRANT/IMMIGRANT PARENTS

Flexible schedules. and checking for the best meeting times enhance parent participation. Some programs report conducting sessions during two time periods, for example afternoon and mid evening (Guzmán, 1990). The migrant program in Laredo, Texas, held a parent session in combination with a student attendance awards function on a Friday evening! Over one hundred migrant parents attended. In attendance, too, were some of the children's grandparents and siblings. While the time block selected by parents was inconvenient to school staff, it was an excellent one for parents who saw this as a social outing to celebrate the award (a bronze medal with ribbon) even after the school function. Success with Friday evening sessions were, similarly, reported by Delgado-Gaitán (1991). Casas et al.(1986) [cited in Minicucci & Olsen, 1993] visited immigrant parents after work at ten o'clock at night; they would receive him with coffee and pan dulce (pastries).

Providing transportation and child care increases attendance at school functions (Bermudez, 1994; Guzmán, 1990; Inger, 1993; Navarrette, 1996; Sosa, 1991). Avance, a parenting, nonprofit agency working with Mexican Americans in the barrio, conducts home visits in public housing to recruit participants for their center (Cohen, 1994). They have a fleet of vans to pick up the mothers for training in their own neighborhoods or for more advanced instruction (GED or precollege) held in the downtown offices. At the Eugene Fields Elementary School in Albuquerque, parents who participate in classes receive on-site day care services. It is,

> staffed by parents whose salary comes from tuition paid by staff and community members who wish to keep their children at the center while they work. Parents who participate in classes and school activities or who volunteer in the classroom can use the service of the day care center without charge. Parents who take part in classes and workshops are required to volunteer in the day care center, where much of the learning and sharing on the parts of both parents and children takes place. (Navarrette, 1996, 81-82)

Other outreach/logistic issues have been addressed through home visits; these not only personalize the invitation to attend school functions, but also assist school staff to understand the parents' concerns (Inger, 1992). Ideally, the first meeting should be held outside of the school, preferably at sites frequented by parents. Successful first meetings are primarily social events; business goals are reserved for subsequent meetings (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; Procidiano & Fisher, 1992). Barquet (1990) notes that parental involvement becomes more relevant to language-minority populations when it is intergenerational and includes extended families.

Attitudinal barriers can be lowered by recognizing that it is not a matter of poor attitudes toward education per se that prevent involvement, but realizing that persons new to this country may not be aware of expectations from the educational system in the United States (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990; Sosa, 1993; Montecel, Gallagher, Montemayor, Villarreal, & Reyna, 1993). A responsive parental education program includes sessions on expectations and roles of parents. Procidiano & Fisher (1992) stress the need for demonstrating an understanding of both the importance of *respeto* and the individual's dignity. To convey these, the authors recommend employing formal titles for parents and a presentation of oneself with formal titles, as well as focusing on the individual and the family rather than bureaucratic procedures.

Attitudinal issues related to language use can be diminished when the following are practiced. Important school information should be sent in both English and Spanish. When holding parent-teacher nights or advisory meetings, parents can listen through headsets to a translator. If some school personnel can speak the language, they can provide assistance. School personnel can participate in activities that provide greater visibility in the community - at festivals, fund raisers or shopping (Cooper & Gonzalez, 1993).

Successful parent involvement programs recognize that parents are not just passive recipients of services. They view parents as contributors and collaborators. Guzmán (1990) described some of the strategies used by the Del Rio Independent School District's parent involvement program in a border community. At the first meeting, parents were asked to describe their needs and provide input. According to Guzmán, this action on the part of the school personnel signaled to parents that the meeting's intent was skills-buildings and served to help achieve ownership for the project goals. Project OPTIMUM in Oakland, California, conducted personal and group interviews, observations from school visits and direct inquiry from leaders of various ethnic communities to assess parental needs. On the basis of identified needs, one-day workshops were organized. A cadre of parents became trainers of other parents. They became facilitators within the school system, creating vocally positive community groups working as agents of change (Gonzales, 1986). An open door policy is practiced at Eugene Fields Elementary (Albuquerque) where parents are welcomed to visit the classrooms and see how their children are being taught. Through this, parents are able to see how to help their children with homework. This view is shared by Inger (1992) who notes that before joining any formal organization Hispanic parents want to acquire the skills and confidence to contribute as equals.

In the Carpintería School District in California, two teachers, a special program director and the migrant director developed the Committee for Latin Parents (COPLA). This parent committee began when a small parent group met and shared their need for training in ways to communicate with the school as well as strategies to help their children with homework. At their group meetings, parents learned how the school system works and about their rights and responsibilities as parents. Most importantly, this program's goal has been, "for parents to learn from each other ways to help their children progress through school and to become a support system for each other (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991)." Similarly, Orum and Navarette (1990, 7,9) indicated how children in the Academia program can be nominated to be in the program by either parents or teachers. Parents must sign a contract agreeing to attend at least 50 percent of the monthly parent activities, read with the child at home for a specified amount of time (or for parents with limited English language skills to have the child read to their parent[s]), establish and enforce rules for homework and school attendance, review and sign the child's homework, and ensure that the child has a library card.

To retain the involvement of low-income Hispanic parents, school meetings must respond to or address some need or concern of the parents. Rather than burdening parents with "should's" or their inability to help, this program equips parents with the tools they need to provide support and resources to their own children.

Literacy programs in the home language can provide meaningful, useful experiences to immigrant parents. When properly implemented, literacy programs can tap parents' resources and can ease the tension caused by role reversal when even young children translate for their parents. Ideally, the books selected should be meaningful and relevant to the lives of children and their families. They must also validate and respect learners' identity, country of origin, and experiences they bring to the school (Lee & Patel, 1994); parents as authors programs accomplish this very well. Literature-based parent involvement programs include programs that focus on teaching parents to use children's literature and programs that interview and assist parents to write stories/remembrances of their childhood to share with the school children, and also includes programs where parents serve as teachers. Through children's literature, parents in Richmond, California could share what they knew about barnyard animals, this was especially the case for the parent who was a non-reader (Contreras-Polk & Díaz, 1995). The aim of the Colorín Colorado, a children's literature program, is, "to draw out of the parent that which he/she already knows and to integrate this knowledge with his/her current reality. For each story read, parents talked about parenting implications. In one story, they discussed not going with strangers and the moral of the story. Nathenson-Mejia (1994) stresses that many literacy building activities can be done at home and then shared with the class at school, e.g., bringing grocery lists from home to be used in comparing/contrasting activities, and bringing stories from home about the origins of their name or how their family came to America.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

During the past several decades, school programs have instituted support programs on the basis of the middle class norm or what the literature identifies as working in schools. Unfortunately, this is too often accomplished without regard to varying circumstances among the population. In the case of the Hispanic community, pressing factors, including poverty, mobility, cultural differences and language constraints make the effort of recruiting and involving parents in their children's schools a very challenging task. Enterprising and interested school personnel have explored ways of minimizing perceived weaknesses and maximizing strengths. The examples cited demonstrate that Hispanic parents will participate when school personnel seek their contribution, every meeting responds to some needs of the parents, and programs consult with parents regarding agendas and meeting formats. Programs that reach out to parents' needs eventually address issues that the school also considers important. This posture contrasts markedly with unsuccessful programs that hold formal events at school and address information at or to the parent, mainly in the form of "shoulds".

Thus, successful programs addressed logistic concerns by providing transportation, child care, flexible/workable meeting hours and dates. They assessed needs, ideally through home visits and made their first contacts with the home a social event. These programs worked on building relationships and being of service to parents. Attitudinal barriers were lowered through hands-on training activities that resulted in parents acquiring new skills that they could see being put to use in later interactions with the schools. Overall, a major attitudinal barrier overcome by successful programs was resolved when the schools themselves moved from a deficit posture to one of empowerment/ collaboration.

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