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The Role of Culture in Engaging Latino Parents' Involvement in School

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One of the critical issues for schools is how to actively involve Latino parents in the schooling process. Although Latino parents are often marginalized in schools due to race, class, and cultural differences, many school personnel suspect Latino parents of not caring about their children's education. This article highlights how a small group of educators working together in a project actively enlisted the participation of Latino parents in schools through a positive and consistent focus on their own cultures. The author suggests that teacher preparation programs explore the power of a culturally relevant approach to working with parents.

Keywords: *culture; parental involvement; schooling; parent workshops; social justice*

A critical issue in the current school reform debate is how to actively involve Latino parents in the schooling process. What is often overlooked is the more challenging issue of how to involve them in the schooling process in ways that are both affirming and empowering to them and of benefit to schools. Many researchers have emphasized the importance of building on culture and language when working with Latino parents (Arvizu, 1992; Bermudez & Marquez, 1996; Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999; Torres-Guzman, 1990). The cultures and languages of parents that differ from that of the dominant culture, however, are often ignored, denigrated, or at best, treated superficially.

This article highlights how a small group of educators working together in a project enlisted the participation of Latino parents or caregivers in schools by focusing on their own cultures and backgrounds. The underlying framework for the development and implementation of the project was Dewey's (1938) philosophy of the utilization of experience as the starting point for learning and Freire's (1971) philosophy of engaging students and teachers in dialogue about their own realities as ways of learning. The project's approach

suggests that when Latino parents' cultures are focused on in positive ways, they are able to be engaged substantively in the schooling process of their children. In addition, parents benefit as they become more knowledgeable and more self-confident in their understanding of how schools function and about what happens there.

As a group, Latino parents have school participation rates that have been described as low to nonexistent (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Many reasons have been given for the low interaction of Latino parents with schools. Among them are a mistrust of large bureaucracies, dramatic differences between what is expected of parents in the United States and in the parents' countries of origin, negative attitudes of school administration and school personnel toward Latino parents, and lack of personnel who speak the parents' language (De Gaetano, Williams, & Volk, 1998; Inger, 1992; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). One of the most compelling reasons given for the lack of school involvement of Latino and other minority groups is their marginalization due to race and class (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Crozier, 2001). Although Crozier does not write specifically about Latino parents, he focuses on how poor and minority groups are viewed from a deficit model by school personnel. Despite this, parental involvement policies treat all parents as if they had the same needs or the same experiences as White, middle-class parents. He suggests that the one-size-fits-all framework does not address ethnic diversity and is fueled by unacknowledged structural racism.

Many school personnel talk about wanting some sort of increased parental involvement in the schools, but they lament what they perceive as a lack of parental caring particularly by parents of poor and Latino children. We often hear examples of how school personnel have tried, in vain, to invite Latino parents into the school. The following are some of the ways that school personnel report having tried to get them involved in schools: (a) letters sent to the home in two languages, (b) meetings set up in the evenings to accommodate working parents, (c) invitations to pot luck dinners, and (d) flyers put up around the neighborhood about meetings. Many teachers, including some Latino teachers, throw their hands up and exclaim, "We really try, but they [parents] just don't care."

The literature on parental involvement provides many examples of how Latino poor and working-class parents become involved in schools in a variety of ways. One of the ways is through interest in the learning of English or in literacy. McCaleb (1994) describes how home-school partnerships were formed through dialogues to generate themes for the coauthorship of books between children and parents. In fact, much of the literature on Latino parents' involvement in schools centers around the development of their

children's literacy and parents' interest in their own literacy (Ada, 1988; Auerbach, 1996; Delgado Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Rodriguez-Brown, Fen Li, & Albom, 1999; Rodriguez-Brown & Shanahan, 1994).

The Language Academy in San Francisco involves Latino parents through various approaches. Among the most interesting is an approach that focuses on Latino leadership training in which language, race, and socioeconomic issues are addressed to prepare parents to become active in their communities (Fern, 1999). This strongly suggests that a way to begin to involve the parents of poor and minority groups to be more active in the schooling process may be through a focus on their cultures and the realization of its importance in learning as well as through dialogues about the realities of their lives.

The Project

The program, The Cross Cultural Demonstration Project, took place several years ago. At that time, I was part of a team of educators from a major private university located in a large northeastern city that received a 3-year federal grant to improve the educational outcomes of English-language learners in public schools. The team worked with teachers, administrators, and parents of two urban elementary schools in an attempt to develop and implement a culturally responsive and bilingual approach to teaching in elementary schools. The primary goal of the 3-year project was to improve the academic outcomes of English-language learners through (a) the use of specific language strategies to enable children to become bilingual and (b) the use of culture as a mediator of learning. This was to be done through monthly staff development for teachers, administrators, and parents and through classroom coaching.

One approach to enlisting culturally diverse parents in their children's schooling is through a conscious emphasis on their own values, experiences, and way of life. Dewey's notion that all human beings possess potentiality and capacity that is activated in particular contexts was an engaging one (Cuffaro, 1995) that inspired our approach. The university team wanted to create a setting and develop interactions that would enable the parents' potential and capacities to emerge and flourish around their children's schooling through what they knew intimately—their ethnicities, backgrounds, language, and culture.

As teacher educators, we are constantly entreating teachers to honor and teach using what children come with—their cultures and experiences. Who

better than parents could help teachers understand children's cultures and experiences? Because the home is a primary transmitter of culture, it is a logical and powerful vehicle to use in engaging parents in schooling. Culture, and what the concept of culture implies, is at the center of learning. Parents, therefore, as the primary transmitters of culture, are a critical component of their children's learning.

The concept of culture has been defined in various ways: as a total way of life including ways of perceiving and behaving (Valentine, 1968), as exhibiting structure and organization as well as demonstrating local uniqueness (Spindler, 1974), or as a system of knowledge that includes beliefs, values, and ways of behaving that are transmitted to individuals and groups by others (Spradley & McCurdy, 1971). One of the dilemmas in defining the concept of culture is that there is a risk of assigning a set of characteristics or particular behaviors to a group without taking into account the many differences that exist within groups and the context in which the group finds itself. More recent definitions of culture view culture as a process that is dynamic and changing (D'Andrade & Straus, 1992). New ways of being and different practices are developed by groups as they adapt to new environments (Reese, 2002). Therefore, we were careful to emphasize that we viewed culture as an ever-changing, dynamic notion that included the past and the present. Despite the many definitions, anthropologists generally accept the idea that culture is learned and transmitted.

The educational system, however, validates and transmits the dominant culture. The ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving, as well as the language and values of the dominant group, are promoted in schools. With its focus on a monocultural education, the school is one of the primary institutions that socializes students into the dominant culture. It is unequivocally clear, however, that monocultural education can no longer be acceptable at this time in our history. The cultures and experiences of the many groups that make up our nation need to be reflected in how and what children learn, how language is used and thought about, how students are assessed, how schools are staffed and administered, and who is included in the process of schooling. A critical part of using a multicultural approach or a culturally responsive approach in schools is the inclusion of students' families and caregivers in the process of teaching and learning. Ultimately, cultural approaches to schooling are about promoting equity and social justice in the schooling process (Banks, 1992, 1995; Gay, 1995, 2000; Nieto, 1996, 2002). How, then, do we acknowledge and include the primary transmitters of culture in schools in ways that are respectful, helpful, and equitable to students and to the schools?

Assumptions

One of the assumptions of this article is that the vast majority of Latino parents do indeed care about their children's schooling. Caring, however, is not manifested only by their being in the school building; there are many ways that parents can be involved in their children's schooling without being in the schools.

For the purposes of this article, the term *parents* will be used to include all those who are the children's caregivers in the home. Some caregivers, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, or older siblings, may be biologically related to children. Other caregivers, however, may not be biologically related; rather, they may be legally appointed guardians or persons who were entrusted by one or both of the biological parents with the raising of the children—*hijos de crianza*.

The term *informal ways of parental participation* will be used to define what parents do at home to help their children's learning. Informal ways of participation may include providing a quiet time and place for children to read or to do homework, helping children with homework, engaging in discussions about what occurred at school or what together or alone they have seen on television, and consciously using strategies during some activities, such as sorting or categorizing in folding laundry or putting away groceries. Fundamental in all of these informal activities are the spoken and unspoken messages given to children about the importance of schooling.

Formal ways of parental involvement, as used in this article, include parents' work in classrooms or in the school. This type of involvement may include teaching a lesson to small groups of children, leading a classroom discussion, or taking part in school-based management teams, as well as the more traditional ways of helping out in the school or classroom, such as accompanying the class on field trips or helping out in the lunchroom.

The university team shared underlying assumptions about parents and caregivers. Among these assumptions were the following: (a) most parents—from all social class levels, races, and ethnicities—want the very best for their children; (b) a great deal of learning goes on in the home; and (c) parental support for children's school learning can take place in various sites—in the home, at the school, or at the district and community level (De Gaetano et al., 1998; Epstein, 1988; Hidalgo, Sui, Bright, Swap, & Epstein, 1995).

The university team consisted of four women—two Puerto Rican and two White colleagues. Although currently we are all teacher educators at different colleges, at the time of the project, three of us worked as curriculum and staff developers at an institute of the university that received the

grant and one colleague was, and is, a professor at the same university. Each one of us came from different ethnic and social class origins but we were united in our belief in multiculturalism and teaching and in our love of children and respect for families. The work with teachers and administrators provided the university team with learning and insights into the complexities of multicultural education and school change. I found that the work with the parents was among the most interesting and rewarding. On-site work with the parents consisted of two 2-hour workshops per month in each of the schools. But the contact with parents became extended beyond just the workshops. The university team was able to visit parents in their homes, have coffee with them at the corner shop, and take part in extended chats on the street or wherever we saw one another. Through these interactions, we obtained rich insights into our own and others' lives and further understood how adults learn. Most important of all was the deep respect that grew from our contacts with the men and women that we met and the friendships that we made.

The Schools

The schools in which the project took place were located in different cities: Site 1 was in the same city as the university and Site 2 was located in a smaller city nearby. The schools were selected for the project based on (a) high percentages of English language learners and (b) the principals' articulated interest and receptivity to our idea of improving children's educational outcomes through a focus on children's cultures and experiences in the teaching–learning process. In short, we wanted to transform the participating classrooms so that the students would “acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to function in an ethnically and racially diverse nation and world” (Banks, 1993, p. 28). The principals, therefore, were supportive of the idea of having outsiders in their respective school. In both of the school sites, the students' ethnic populations were similar and were characterized by poverty (92% to 98% of the children qualified for the free lunch program).

The Sample

In terms of ethnicities, the children in both schools were predominantly Latinos. In Site 1, there were Latinos (85%), African Americans (5%), North American Whites (5%), dual ethnicities (3%), and English-speaking Caribbeans (2%). The Latinos were Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Cubans.

In Site 2, the ethnic breakdown was as follows: Latinos (77%), African Americans (14 %), English-speaking Caribbeans (4%), and dual ethnicities (5%). The Latinos were representative of Puerto Rico, Colombia, Ecuador, and El Salvador, with a predominance of Puerto Ricans. In the participating classrooms at both sites, all of the children were Latinos.

In Site 1, of the 10 participating teachers, 9 were Puerto Rican and 1 was Cuban; all were women. The participating parents in Site 1 were all Latinas: 16 Puerto Ricans, 3 Dominicans, and 1 Ecuadorian.

In Site 2, the teachers represented a more diverse ethnic population than did the children and their families. Of the eight teachers who volunteered to take part in the project, one was African American, one was White, one was Asian, and five were Latinas. All of the Latinas were of Puerto Rican background. There were seven female and one male teacher. Of the 15 participating parents in Site 2, there were 13 Puerto Ricans, 1 Salvadoran, and 1 North American White mother, who was married to a second-generation Puerto Rican man, who said that she wanted to learn more about her husband's heritage for herself and for her children.

One of the hallmarks of the project was a deliberate and conscious effort to use a collaborative approach in the development and implementation of our culturally relevant approach in the classrooms. This meant that the administrators, teachers, and the parents of the participating classrooms were to contribute and have, as much as possible, a voice in how the project was to evolve. The actual experiences and contributions of the three groups, therefore, were consciously utilized throughout the 3 years of the project.

The 1st Year: Beginning the Work With Parents

Before beginning the workshops with parents, the university team visited and observed the schools several times. We became familiar with the neighborhoods, met parents, and conducted observations in the two communities. We also became familiar with local store owners, crossing guards, and with the *de facto* parent leaders.

When the project began, there was already some form of parental participation in each of the schools. At Site 1, the principal had designated one of the classrooms for the use of parents and many parents often socialized there as they waited until they could take their children home. Some parents were involved in line up, assembly duty, and fund-raising for special events. At Site 2, parental involvement consisted of volunteering for cafeteria duty or

for special events, such as accompanying teachers on class trips or making costumes for plays. In addition to this kind of traditional parental involvement in their schools, the principals welcomed the opportunity to involve parents in new and different ways. The team believed that parental involvement was more than housekeeping chores in the school and classrooms. Parents had to be exposed to other possibilities so that they could select how they wanted to involve themselves as partners with the teachers in their children's schooling. The parents could choose to involve themselves from the home, at the school site, or perhaps at the district level.

Engaging the Parents

As the project was being introduced to the schools through meetings with teachers, each principal took care to inform parents of the classrooms that would be part of the project and that they, too, would be an integral part of a process that would emphasize their own cultures in the school. The principals spoke to individual parents and made each one responsible for bringing one or more parents to an initial meeting that was to take place during school hours at the school site. Young children would be taken care of by a community volunteer at each of the school sites. At Site 1, there were 20 women present at the first meeting; at Site 2, 15 people came, 14 women and 1 man. We were aware that the initial meeting with parents would be critical in engaging them in the project.

At the first meeting, we gave an overview of what we wanted to do—help children learn more and learn better through an emphasis on culture and become bilingual through the conscious and consistent use of two languages. We conducted every meeting in two languages, Spanish and English, and we always focused on parents and on their children. We told our own stories about how we had experienced school and how we came to believe as we did. Although we presented a framework for workshop topics, we assured the participants that we were open to developing our agendas based on their needs and ideas. We encouraged the parents to ask questions, to give their opinions, and to help us think through how best to address their role in the project. We were conscious that we walked a fine line between imposing our ideas about what we thought was needed and what the parents wanted and needed. We were conscious not to impose a “banking” method in the project; rather, we firmly believed that the parents' realities and thinking needed to guide how the project would unfold (Freire, 1971).

Workshops for Parents

Interactive, experiential workshop sessions that focused on the parents' backgrounds and experiences were developed through the interests and questions that the parents expressed to us as well as the dialogues we had with them. Our previous experiences that focused on multicultural education with early childhood populations served as the foundation and framework for the workshop sequence that we used (see Williams, De Gaetano, Sutherland, & Harrington, 1985). The workshops during the 1st year, therefore, were presented using an order that began with a focus on the self and family and then moved to an emphasis on the community and, finally, to the school setting.

Each workshop began with an icebreaker and a review of what had taken place in the previous workshop session. Care was taken to make connections from one workshop topic to another and to include experiential activities that would concretize the ideas being focused on. There were always some activities or ideas for parents to try out at home with their children as a result of each workshop. Through the workshop topics, parents remembered their childhood and their learning experiences and they spoke about their hopes and dreams for themselves and for their children. At each workshop, time was always allotted for the sharing of ideas, experiences, and thoughts.

Community

Toward the second part of the school year, the focus of the workshops shifted from an emphasis on the culture of the individual and as members of a family and group to an emphasis on the community. Discussions explored the parents' perceptions of their community, how each family used the community, and ways that their own children viewed the community. The parents were asked to consider what could be of interest to children in the community and the kinds of learning that went on there. They also were asked to attempt to see the neighborhood through the eyes of their own children. Each parent group took several community walks to experience the community as another locus of culture. During one of the walks, the parents were asked to take photographs of stores, street signs, and significant people in the neighborhood (e.g., vendors, crossing guards, bodega owners, postal workers). Some parents audiotaped familiar sounds of the neighborhood. The parents used the photographs and audiotapes as a basis for making learning materials for the classrooms.

Teachers

Throughout this time, we had been working with teachers in a parallel manner: We gave monthly workshop sessions and we coached teachers in their classrooms. In contrast to Site 1 where teachers reacted more positively to the parents participation in classrooms and in the school, at Site 2, we had heard one teacher make disparaging remarks about the educational levels of the parents. A few others had some reservations about what the parents would do in their classrooms. Consequently, during the last part of the school year, we began to ask parents to meet with teachers as partners in the project. One of the first of these meetings was a luncheon in which both groups worked together to prepare the food. In preparing food and then sharing what they had made, these informal meetings proved to be successful. By interacting informally, teachers and parents began to see one another in new ways. The same teacher who had made the disparaging remarks about the educational level of parents began to be enthusiastic about having a parent come into her classroom. There was a realization that knowledge is not necessarily dependent on schooling.

Both teachers and parents were carefully prepared for parent observations in teachers' classrooms. Each group was asked to discuss what they thought their role was to be during and after these observations. The teachers had to become comfortable with parents observing what they were doing and the parents had to understand that they were to be in classrooms to learn more about how the classrooms functioned so that they could become comfortable in them. As a result of the observations, some parents commented on how they now understood how difficult and taxing teaching could be. At Site 1, parents were in support of what they saw in the classrooms. They objected, however, to the grouping of children according to reading levels. They commented that it was obvious who were good readers and who were not. A few parents at Site 2 commented that they did not see the use of any cultural connections to learning in the classrooms that they observed. Some parents at both school sites wanted to try their hand at helping individual or small groups of children with tasks in the classroom. At both schools, the parents were increasing their social and knowledge capital about school classrooms as they observed and became increasingly comfortable in the classrooms. Although some teachers welcomed parents into their classrooms, others who had been initially reluctant began to see a value in having parents in the classrooms.

The 2nd Year

Although the 1st year of our work with parents focused on the importance of culture in our lives, during the 2nd year, the project placed a strong emphasis on parents as learners, as teachers, and as transmitters of culture. An example of one of the workshops during the 2nd year of the project was "Teachers in the Lives of Parents." The parents were asked to think about someone in their childhood who had taught something special to them. After a brief discussion, the parents were asked to depict a representation of that experience through the making of a group mural. Each participant was free to make a representation of their choice on their work space. Some cut out paper and material for a collage, others drew or painted, but they all expressed themselves either figuratively or symbolically on the mural. As they talked about the significant teachers in their own lives, we wrote what they said on a sheet affixed to the mural. Many of the important teachers in their lives had been grandparents, parents, friends, or school teachers. This type of workshop sparked a great deal of discussion. Some parents commented on how most of the significant teachers in their lives had been family members. The activity, and the discussion that ensued, helped the participants understand the significance of their role as teachers of their own children.

Other workshops during the 2nd year of our work with parents included several workshops on the development of the first and second language in children. There were also workshops on active learning as teaching strategies, the identification of individual's skills, how to model learning activities, and the importance of storytelling. Every workshop led to greater awareness of the importance of supporting the first language at home and of being positive toward learning the second language. Interest in language issues led parents to the making of books of children's poetry, folk sayings, and favorite, simple recipes in Spanish.

To prepare parents for their role as partners in the classroom, we used role play and simulations and we, as well as the teachers, helped the parents to prepare short lessons. Some parents became active in formal ways in the school by helping small groups of children in reading or math. A few parents worked with children's writing in Spanish. One member of the parent group demonstrated to the children how to make kites. A mother, who admitted to us that she could not read or write, taught the children how to crochet squares as the teacher taught the children about multiplication through their crocheting.

Not everyone chose to work in classrooms as teachers. Other parents chose to be helpers in noninstructional ways in the school while being

Table 1
Parental Involvement in Classrooms Across Site by Project Year

Parental Involvement	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Instructional	15%	40%	45%
Non-instructional	15%	10%	0%

Note: The number of visits for the 3 years are as follows: Year 1 = 26, Year 2 = 47, Year 3 = 23. The remainder of the time parents were involved in nonclassroom activities, such as helping out in the office or cafeteria.

actively involved as supporters of their children's learning at home. They continued to be comfortable in being partners in nonacademic ways in classrooms (e.g., distributing and collecting papers, making bulletin board displays) but they commented that their presence in classrooms helped them to be more attentive to their children's learning at home. As a result, they became more active in informal ways as partners with teachers in the schooling of their children.

The 3rd Year

During the 3rd year of the project, many of the parents continued to go into classrooms as partners with teachers to listen to children read, to tell stories, or to present actual mini-lessons. Table 1 shows the yearly percentage of parents involved in instructional activities in classrooms at the two school sites. The table includes the number of times during the 3 years of the project that the project ethnographer visited classrooms at the two school sites in which parents chose to participate as partners with teachers. During the 3rd year, the ethnographer observed the classrooms 23 times. She documented an average of 15% of the parents' time devoted to instructional activities during that time. During the 2nd year, out of 47 site visits to both schools, parents were involved in instructional activities 40% of the time. During the last year of the project, out of 23 visits made by the ethnographer, 45% of the time was devoted to instructional activities by the parents. All of the parents involved in the project self-reported being informally active in their children's schooling at home. The nature of that involvement, however, was not documented.

During the 3rd year of the project, workshops continued for the first half of the school year and parents were urged to think about and discuss how they would continue to be active in the schools and how they could be a support to one another after the project officially terminated. During the last

months of the project, parents were prepared to present the culturally relevant approach to parent participation to parents at another school. In preparation for this new task, the parents reviewed and critiqued the process that they had undergone. In some cases, workshop agendas and the order in which they had been presented were revised by the parents. For the university staff, this revision and critique served as one measure of evaluation of the workshops and the parental developmental process.

Project Impact

Evaluation surveys and interviews were conducted by an outside evaluator at the end of every project year. During the 1st year of the project, parents were asked the following questions in surveys and interviews: (a) what had been most useful from the project and (b) what had made the most impact on the parents from their participation in the project. The parents overwhelmingly responded, "*Mas consciencia de la cultura*" ("Greater cultural awareness"). Data gathered from the surveys and interviews indicated that there had been a strong focus on personal gains made from their participation in the project during the 1st year. During the 2nd year, all of the parents strongly emphasized that they now realized how important their culture and language was in the learning process for their children. In addition, many felt positive about their own participation in classrooms and in the project. During the final year of the project, the parents said that what was most beneficial from the project was their own increased participation in their children's learning. What they found most meaningful were the skills that they had gained from working with children at home and in the classrooms.

Attrition

In Site 1, there was a core of 12 to 14 parents who steadily attended workshops throughout the 3 years of the project. A group of 6 to 8 parents attended some workshops and not others. In Site 2, there were 10 parents who were consistent in their attendance at workshops. Of the 14 parents who came to the project at the first session, 4 of them did not stay for the full 3 years. One of these parents left after the second session and never came back. Two parents left the project after the 1st year: one left to finish her high school program and the other left to enter community college. Both women attributed their resolve to return to school to the project. The only male parent who took part in the project had to leave because his job was changed from a night shift to a day shift. At both school sites, all of the

participants indicated that their participation in the project led to their being more knowledgeable about and active in their children's schooling.

Project Results

We began our work with parents with the assumptions that most parents—from all social class levels and ethnicities—want the best for their children and are interested in their children's learning. We also knew that parents were already teaching children many things, although often unaware of this role as teacher, and that parental support for children's school learning can happen in many places—at home, at school, or at the district and community level (De Gaetano et al., 1998; Epstein, 1988; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). These assumptions were substantiated during the 1st year of the project and continued to be reinforced in subsequent years.

We knew that we had to maintain constant contact with parents using a forum that emphasized their backgrounds, experiences, realities, and interests. Although Dewey (1902) wrote about children's learning, I believe that what he wrote also is relevant to adults, "Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within" (p. 9).

Our workshops were designed in ways that began with the personal and had relevance to parents' lives. The workshop topics then moved to identifying and utilizing the skills and knowledge that the parents possessed to help children at school or at home. The workshops were always designed to be experiential and focused on families and children. We were present every week at both sites for the duration of the project and two of our team members went into each of the participating classrooms a minimum of once a month.

The parents who were involved in the project gained cultural capital through their increased knowledge about the workings of schools. This was evident when they commented on how children's reading groups made their reading levels apparent and on the lack of cultural connections to learning in some classrooms. They were able to observe classrooms and be analytical about what they saw. They also were able to take a partnership role with teachers in the schooling process of their children—at home or in school. Although many parents had not been conscious of their informal involvement in their children's learning at home, after the 1st year of their participation in the project, they had become aware of the important role that they play at home in their own children's learning.

During the 2nd year, the parents moved from personal concerns regarding the importance and pervasiveness of culture in their lives and the

crucial role they held in their children's learning to broader concerns of schooling through a deeper understanding of how learning takes place in classrooms. As their understanding of the language acquisition process deepened, they became conversant in the significance of strengthening their children's first language. For the classroom, they made books and other learning materials that emphasized their own as well as their children's experiences. Hence, they became partners with the teachers in the school and in the home. By the 3rd year, the parents worked with teachers by supporting concepts that children had been taught in school. They told stories and listened to children read individually at home and in small groups in school. They demonstrated more confidence in their personal abilities and strengths as Latino parents. Significantly, they discussed issues of concerns they had about the schools and the communities in which they lived. Some of them also began to be more active in the community as change agents.

One of the most rewarding and important outcomes of the cultural approach to parental involvement was the growing sense that parents were becoming more aware and active about social issues that affected them and were feeling more empowered to act. At Site 1, there were many discussions about the impact of working together for specific causes. As a result of these discussions, parents took action when a street light was needed near the school building. The parents wrote letters to their local congressman and went to his office to lobby for the installment of the street light.

At the same school, one of the parents came to a workshop session and reported how a news commentator on the nightly news had described their community with negative objectionable stereotypes. As she recounted what she had heard, many of the parents became incensed. One of them, who had emerged as a leader, decided to write a letter voicing her and others' indignation about the negative comments. After writing the letter, everyone signed it and it was sent to the news station. As a follow up to the letter, the parent telephoned the television studio and a member of the commentator's staff spoke to her and apologized for the unfortunate comments. Although the parents expressed dismay that there was no public apology, they had empowered themselves to take action about something that they felt had been an injustice. In both schools, parents were anxious to discuss discrimination and what to do when they encountered it.

Freire's (1971) concept of praxis as reflection and action on what is to be changed is relevant to these situations. The parents' action to get a street light near the school and their response against the inflammatory report about their community, as well as their interest and concern about discrimination, are powerful examples of praxis. Dewey also emphasizes action, albeit from a different perspective. According to Dewey (1938), real learning happens

when there is reflection on experience that culminates in some form of action. That action leads to more learning.

Conclusion

An important thread that guided our work throughout the life of the project was Freire's (1971) belief that there can be no success with an educational program if the people involved do not understand and respect the ideas of the program participants. For the Latino parents in this project, the emphasis on language and culture was a critical factor in their becoming involved in schools and in schooling. The parents became cognizant of the importance their culture and language have in their lives and in the lives of their children. Important factors in the success of the project were that two of us were representative of their own Latino backgrounds and all four of us were able to communicate in their language. Other, perhaps more important, elements were our attitudes as we worked with parents, which enabled them to become a more integral part of the schools. We were respectful of what the parents already knew and we firmly believed that they had much to offer.

We held a strong belief that cultural diversity needs to be given more than a superficial or stereotypic focus; it is a strength that needs to be emphasized. Although we had respect for parents as individuals, we also were keenly aware that their culture, ethnicity, and language were critical areas that needed to be understood, emphasized, and celebrated if we wanted to reach them as partners in their children's schooling.

Similar presentations to other groups of Latino parents indicate that culture and language are topics of great interest and concern to them. They become more aware of the critical role they play in their children's learning and become active as allies in their children's schooling when they perceive that what is being offered will benefit their children. They do care.

Parental involvement is essential if minority students are to become empowered (Cummins, 1989). That participation implies a responsibility of the school personnel in being proactive in culturally sensitive ways toward engaging minority parents in the various facets of their own children's schooling. School administrators and teachers also need to become aware of the myriad ways that learning in the home occurs and can be called on to reinforce and support school learning (Epstein, 1995; Moll, 1988). It is also critical that parents be treated with respect, not with the condescension and/or marginalization they say they often experience from many teachers and administrators.

To prepare administrators and teachers to be proactive with parents in culturally sensitive ways, faculties of schools of education must understand

that courses in educational theories of learning, or methods of teaching, are not enough. Many of these courses do not prepare school personnel in becoming responsive to the diversity of their students. It is imperative that courses explicitly include and tackle issues of language, class, and race of teachers, students, and parents to prepare school personnel to teach and address school issues in the 21st century. Schools of education would do well to explore the power that a focus on culture holds for increasing parental participation in supporting school learning.

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