Redefining School and Community Relations:
Teachers' Perceptions of Parents as Participants and Stakeholders

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Parent involvement is widely acclaimed as an important component of educational reform. The National Education Goals state that "by the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (1994).

What should be the nature of the parent-school partnership? Who sets the agenda for parent involvement? How can parents, schools, and other organizations best promote the overall well-being of children? A review of the parent involvement literature shows that schools typically decide what parents should know and teach their children and therefore set the agenda for school-parent relationships. Particularly for low-income and minority families, involving parents has been narrowly viewed as a way to help parents develop a knowledge base or set of skills to assist with their children's academic and social success in school. The underlying assumption is that parents should partner with schools so that parents can be taught what is worth knowing

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and what they should teach their children. (Comer, 1984; 1988; White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992).

"Building and maintaining a genuine partnership with parents is a process of continually seeking to understand assumptions and to share meanings and expectations" (Family Resource Coalition, 1996, p. 12). Partnerships can only grow when they are based on mutual trust and respect for the other's values, perspectives and experiences. It is not uncommon, however, for minority parents and families to feel alienated from the school. Minority parents may lack knowledge about school protocol and may feel inadequate or unwelcome due to differences of income, education or ethnicity compared to school personnel. This difference may result in the perception that the school is indifferent or even cold. In turn, the school then judges parents as uninterested in school involvement. Additionally, the psychological distance between minority group parents and teachers is compounded when school personnel do not see themselves or the school as a part of the surrounding community and the families.

Why is parent involvement so highly valued? Research shows that a correlate of increased levels of parent involvement is an increase in student achievement (Epstein, 1995; Flaxman & Inger, 1992; Hickman, Greenwood, & Miller, 1995), as well as improved student attendance and reduced dropout rates (Berger, 1991; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). These are desirable outcomes from an "educentric" perspective, however they fall short of fully addressing the National Educational Goal to "increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the *social, emotional,* and academic growth of children." Clearly, schools should not be expected to single-handedly undertake this task. Educators and parents together must promote the well-being of students within family and community contexts.

School collaboration with other institutions and agencies provides rich and varied possibilities and realities. Additionally, collaborating with parents and communities, while capitalizing on their resources and strengths, promotes social and emotional growth for children. This simultaneously promotes parent, family and community empowerment and well-being (Lubetkin, 1996; Nevárez-La Torre, 1997; Zuniga & Alva, 1996). Successful parent-school collaborations must include opportunities for parents to recognize and value their skills and knowledge, utilize those strengths and resources present among the parents and the community and create multiple opportunities for parents to expand their abilities. This is particularly true for low income parents whose only access to education may be through their children's school. Collaboratively promoting the well-being of the student and the family develops human and social capital that strengthens families and communities.

El Instituto Familiar, described elsewhere in detail, is considered a successful parent involvement initiative (Zuniga & Alva, 1996). *El Instituto Familiar* concretizes Davies' (1991) view of "a new definition of parent involvement...that is not limited to traditional parent activities in the school building...where families are viewed not as deficient, but as sources of strength" (p. 379). The guiding principles

were to help parents (1) value their own knowledge, (2) share their knowledge with others, (3) learn new skills and talents to benefit themselves and their families, and (4) become involved on their own terms in the life of the school. The starting point of *el Instituto Familiar* was to ask parents to self-assess their strengths, talents, and set the collaborative school-parent agenda by voicing their needs and wants to guide and shape the nature of their involvement in the school.

El Instituto Familiar is housed at a middle school in a large school district in southern California. About 95 percent of the population is Latino and experiences daily economic, social, cultural, and linguistic tensions and realities typical of a large urban setting. *El Instituto Familiar* initially involved a modest 10 to 15 parents. In five years it has reached and involved over a hundred parents in multiple ways. A few of these include: taking a variety of classes, some taught by parents; making policy decisions about parent classes; and seeing through to reality a decision that their early adolescent students should wear uniforms to school. The initiative has been successful in terms of parent mobilization, instruction and creative allocation of resources, constructs borrowed from Nettles (1991) and Delgado-Gaitan (1990) to assess parent involvement effectiveness.

This exploratory study examines the teachers' attitudes and beliefs about parent-school relations in general, and the parent involvement that developed over time through *el Instituto Familiar*. The specific question asked in this study is: what are teachers' perceptions of parent involvement, and of documented growth in the parents' involved in *el Instituto Familiar* and in the life of the school?

Method

The data gathered were from twelve teachers at the school (representing about one fourth of the teaching staff) who chose to participate in this study. The participants were asked to respond to six questions that addressed issues of parents' and teachers' expectations, home-school partnerships, and the teachers' perceived benefits of the parent involvement resulting from *el Instituto Familiar*. After their free response to each question, the researcher/facilitator asked them to collectively rank order the responses from most to least important. This provided agreement that the group's intended meaning and language were captured.

Findings

The analysis and interpretation of the data from the focus group interviews reveal a common pattern in that the responses typically began through the "teacher lens." The teachers' expanded responses, however, clustered into one of two positions: those that maintained a strong and consistent "educentric" stance and those that expressed a broader understanding of parent involvement as embedded in a family and community context. Subsequent analysis revealed that educentric views were strongly held by the veteran teachers who had at least 13 years of

teaching experience. In contrast, the teachers with eight or less years of experience and the novice teachers expressed broader views. The latter group frequently expanded the discussion of each question in ways that revealed an unusually keen awareness of and sensitivity to educational matters in the context of family and community and in relation to social, cultural, political and/or economic realities. Additionally, they viewed parent involvement as a means to improve conditions for families and community. These teachers' observations and comments demonstrated a very sophisticated view of parent involvement. The responses exemplify the kind of attitudes, understanding and reasoning that the literature upholds as critical for teachers to develop if they are to be successful at fostering and promoting parent involvement. They also are consistent with proponents of transformative education who call for teachers to develop a critical social consciousness (Freire, 1970, 1973; Maher & Tetreault, 1994).

Benefits of Parent Involvement

The teachers unanimously recognized the value of parent involvement for many of the same reasons that are well documented in the literature—promoting student academic success, garnering parent support in matters of discipline and school attendance and in general fostering parent-school cooperation. The family-community oriented teachers discussed parent involvement from the perspective of benefits accruing to parents, family and community, not just the students. They dealt with issues of fostering parent self-esteem and getting parents involved in non-academic activities such as sports. One teacher commented about the message sent to younger siblings when they see parents involved with older children. "They [younger siblings] understand the parents care about the children *throughout* their schooling." Another teacher observed that "when parents are involved, their children behave better because parent presence creates accountability at school and *in the community*" (italics added).

Teachers' Expectations of Parents

Teachers agreed that their expectations focused on specific ways that parents can support their efforts in school—reinforce academic achievement, support teachers in matters of discipline and help students understand the need and value of education. Additionally, family-community oriented teachers linked their expectations of parents to the family—"parent commitment to the well-being of the child by giving time to the child" and in general "being involved in the child's life."

Parents' Expectations of Teachers and the School

The teachers commonly believed that parents place great responsibility and expectations on them and the school. In addition to providing a high quality of education for their children, teachers felt that other expectations included "solving all the child's and the family's problems—and that includes health, drug problems,

discipline and psychological problems." "Being a social worker" was how one of the teachers summed up parent expectations. Several veteran teachers felt particularly burdened by these expectations. They discussed their dislike of the idea that the school should be the hub of the community where services to families might be available. In contrast, family-community oriented teachers understood the parents' expectations of them within the parents' cultural perspective. They talked about differences of the concept "teacher" across cultures, particularly as they differ between a North American versus a Latino perspective, and that Latino parents view the teacher with respect and deference. They further recognized that many of the parents have little formal education and use teachers as resources for problem-solving.

Factors Affecting Parent Involvement

All of the teachers recognized that language and education affect parent involvement. The veteran teachers focused on the "problems at home" that included "over committed parents," transience, and neighborhood issues like drug and gang problems. Family and community oriented teachers painted a broad picture of systemic issues—social, political, academic and cultural—that the group went on to flesh out, e.g.: "not understanding the American educational system" and the "lack of knowledge and skills that marginalize parents." They discussed that social and economic issues affect how parents feel about becoming involved in the school, a key issue in the literature pointing to minority parents' feeling of alienation from the schools.

What Schools Can Do To Overcome Barriers

The teachers were then asked "What can schools do to overcome barriers?" One veteran teacher initially responded and others agreed that "teachers do too much," a common response from teachers who do not wish to become involved in promoting parent participation (Ramirez, 1997). After probing, the veteran teachers responded with school and teacher accommodations that might entice parents to become more involved. Some of these were to provide ESL instruction for parents, vary meeting times for parents, find more effective communication mechanisms and do home visits.

The family-community oriented teachers responded with suggestions to address systemic concerns they raised in response to an earlier question. These included changing the standard ways that schools and teachers do the business of schooling (e.g.: "create site-based decision making that involves parents" and "recreate a school structure that is less bureaucratic, less impersonal and less budget-driven.") and in general overcoming barriers to parent involvement in the broad context of needed systemic changes.

Benefits of el Institute Familiar

The teachers unanimously agreed that many benefits resulted from *el Instituto*

Familiar. These included more parent presence and involvement in the school, more open communication with teachers, more support of the school, and improved student attendance rates. Family-community oriented teachers noted that the students benefited from seeing their parents learning at school, and that the community benefited by having involved and better-prepared community members. Another teacher observed some of the parent classes "built camaraderie between parents and children," a critical element during early adolescence.

A finer-grained analysis is made here of some of the responses given by teachers because they reveal a curious incongruity. On the one hand, they stated they observed improved parent presence and benefits that the parent classes brought about. On the other hand, they made generally negative statements about the parents' school involvement and their lack of concern and attention to issues that impact their children and family well-being. Despite improved parent participation in the school by the teachers' own recognition, they still seemed to hold onto fundamentally unchanged views of the parents.

Example 1

"On Saturday the hallway is filled with parents and students at the computers. Parents are enhancing their information and knowledge. Once parents are involved, things fall into place."

"This (parent presence) benefits the students because it shows a relationship between parents and the school."

"The more educated they become, the better off we all are. They become better parents and give more support to their children."

YET

"They just don't care. They won't learn the language. They need to learn the [English] language and culture."

Example 2

Group members recognized factors such as language barriers, transportation and baby-sitting issues that limited involvement and participation.

YET

"These parents are so short sighted. They don't have vision."

Example 3

"These parent classes have helped bridge the gap between home and school."

"Parents speak well of school activities and events to other parents."

YET

"These parents don't participate. They just think about today. They don't care."

Discussion

This exploratory study of teachers' perceptions of parent involvement indicates that teachers do not possess a single, commonly held view of parents and parent involvement, even at the same school site. It provides a concrete example of teachers' wide range of beliefs and attitudes. It further illustrates the difficulty in challenging some teachers to change perceptions about parents, much less viewing parents as partners in their children's education and in the teaching and learning process for the betterment of individuals and of the community. It also raises questions about education and community as influenced by one's culture, and teachers' willingness to recognize that parent involvement ultimately must mean parent and community development. How can we begin to understand and explain the wide variation of teacher beliefs and attitudes seen at one school?

Length of Teaching Experience

Particularly striking was the marked difference in views and attitudes between veteran and non-veteran teachers. The veteran teachers were powerful in drawing the novice teachers into their deeply engrained educentric views about parent involvement. This calls into question the critical nature of the professional socialization process of novice teachers. What is the nature of the professional socialization and under whose tutelage does it occur? While the novice teachers initially voiced divergent views, they ultimately verbally ceded to the veteran teachers' perception of parents. In the face of change, the veteran teachers were not able to integrate the attitudes and behaviors of parents who were involved in *el Instituto Familiar* with their perceptions of parents in general. Rather, they seemed to filter the data through a lens of long and tightly held views of the parents and the community. Conversely, the family-community oriented teachers were unable to sway the veteran teachers from their stance. Some literature on barriers to promoting parent involvement include teacher apathy, unwilling to commit time and lack of teacher preparation programs that promote parent involvement (Khan, 1996; Ramirez, 1997). Findings in this study fit with barriers cited by Yap and Enoki (1995) that include negative attitudes towards parents by school personnel and a narrow conceptualization of what constitutes parent involvement.

Ethnicity/Experience with Diversity

A second difference across teachers was ethnic composition. While the veteran teachers were Anglo, about one third of the family-community oriented teachers were Latino. Much literature in teacher education calls for diversifying the teacher education pool. This position is based on studies indicating that teachers tend to view students, parents and community, through their own cultural prism and may not be ready to understand or address the learning needs and issues of the students

and families of the communities in which they teach (Ahlquist, 1991; Avery & Walker, 1993; Kestner, 1994; Nevárez-La Torre, 1997). A related recommendation found in the teacher preparation literature is that preservice teachers must engage in actual, lived experiences with diversity (French, 1996; García & Pugh, 1992; Guillaume, Zuniga, & Yee, 1998). Such experiences allow preservice teachers the opportunity and challenge of examining their own cultural views and beliefs and developing an openness to new ways of understanding and thinking. Additionally, they better prepare teachers for working in a diverse community more so than course work on theories and methods devoid of real life experiences. As evident in some of the comments by the teachers in this study, perceptions of parents were influenced by understanding or lack thereof of the culture and concomitant values of the parents and community.

Teachers' Beliefs

Pointing to years of teaching and ethnic composition of a school's teaching staff to account for teachers' attitudes about parents and community is a somewhat facile responses to a complex issue. Instead, compelling questions can engage us in more helpful thinking: what predisposes some teachers to be blind to change as it occurs around them? What predisposes others to see, understand and articulate schooling and parent involvement in contexts beyond school boundaries and in terms of social, political and cultural contexts? The literature on teachers' attitudes and beliefs reveals the critical need and challenge of changing perceptions, given the intractable nature of teachers' belief and knowledge systems (Ahlquist, 1994; Avery & Walker, 1993; Guillaume, Zuniga, & Yee 1998; Pajares, 1992). Preservice and inservice training alone are ineffective in modifying predispositions and belief systems, or encouraging professional growth. Kagan suggests that "conceptual change is a painful process that often begins with the dissonant clash of dissenting voices" (Kagan, 1992, p. 29). The teachers involved in this study possess the basic ingredient—dissenting voices and perceptions—to begin the dialogue. Those involved in teacher education programs and educators with a broad vision of school-community relations are called to be dissenting voices, to challenge the educentric borders that teachers place around parent involvement.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

Helping teachers to become open to working with parents and fostering parent involvement beyond educentric borders means more than just mandating curriculum additions to include a parent involvement component at the preservice level. Weaving university course work and classroom/community experience together seems most promising for bringing about a visceral understanding of the value of the school-parent-community relationship. French (1996) describes what seems to be a powerful curriculum experiment for preservice teachers in which students were required to spend 45 hours with an assigned family. Through their direct contact

with the families and reflecting on their involvement through writing assignments, it was anticipated that the students would develop into school professionals with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to work with families. Such experiences hold promise for bringing about changes in perceptions, beliefs and practices. The present study seems hopeful in that many novice teachers held views and beliefs that demonstrated a deep understanding of parents, families, the community and parent involvement. Indeed, further research might explore how teachers who demonstrate a sophisticated level of understanding arrived at that understanding.

A second issue that arises is one of socialization into the profession. In the face of teaching in an environment in which a novice teacher does not share views and values of veteran colleagues, how does one hold one's ground? Is it possible or wise to hold one's ground? What are the implications for tenure of novice teachers if they are viewed by colleagues as difficult to work with or unwilling to uphold the culture of the school? These are questions that merit investigation and hold promise for assisting novice teachers in maintaining fresh and fragile views and practices that require nurturing, not pruning.

A third issue is how to engage veteran teachers in "difficult dialogues" that guide and challenge them in helpful ways to examine long-held beliefs and practices in need of change or updating. A large body of research indicates that teacher cognition and thought processes can be positively influenced through reflection, dialogue and critical thinking. "Constructivist-oriented approaches that require dialogue, reflection and inquiry...are likely to influence teacher change in desired directions" (Tatto, 1998, p. 66). How can veteran teachers in schools become engaged in inquiry, dialogue and reflection about their practices and underlying beliefs in ways that might help them think critically about their own development and sociohistorical experiences in relation to issues of social justice and diversity (Jennings, 1995)? Through dialectic discourse, can veteran teachers reflect on how and why knowledge becomes constructed the way it does? (McLaren, 1988). Is change possible, and if so, to what extent? What kind of "difficult dialogue" is most useful and appropriate? How much time is necessary for change in practice to occur? Further research can reveal answers to these important questions.

Conclusion

Given the challenges that the fabric of our society faces in the Twenty-First Century, teachers must be compelled to understand the interconnectedness of parent involvement in its broadest sense in the life of the school and the wider benefits for family and community. Quoting again from a teacher in this study, "the students benefit from seeing their parents learning at school, and the community benefits by having involved and better-prepared community members." Another teacher observed that schools should "develop sense of community around the school" to help overcome school-parent barriers. An overlooked source is looking

to the strengths and talents within the community itself. Nevárez-La Torre observes that "the wealth of knowledge within grassroots structures often goes unnoticed by traditional institutions such as schools; thus these programs are not accessed or used by the schools" (Nevárez-La Torre, 1997, p. 57). It is critical for teachers to understand and foster the interconnectedness of family and community involvement and development as a key contributor not only for student academic success but also for positive far-reaching family and community benefits.

Finally, parent involvement and development must also mean school and parent and community capacity building. There is a vital link between parent involvement and opportunities for parents to mobilize themselves. Nettles (1991) defines mobilization as creating a climate and format for parents to voice needs and wants and to find solutions. Mobilization in the school context means that parents develop confidence, talents, skills, and knowledge that they can apply in other community contexts and organizations. Thus, the school, the family and the community become strengthened and enriched. Schools exist for everyone to learn and grow—students, teachers, parents and community. It is inexcusable for us to accept less.

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