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STRATEGIES FOR VALUING NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING PARENTS: ONE CULTURALLY RELEVANT DEED AT A TIME

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Abstract: U.S. public schools are witnessing a dramatic enrollment increase in non-English speaking students. Despite prior legal decisions and attempts by school leaders, there still remains an academic gap between Hispanic students and their Caucasian peers. From firsthand visits with Hispanic households, this article addresses strategies for building meaningful home-school relationships and valuing the students' cultural knowledge.

Increasingly, significant numbers of linguistically diverse families have migrated to the United States, and their children have entered schools across the country with the hope of acquiring competency in the English language and gaining access to relevant academic experiences (Brock, 2001; Civil, 2008; Fitzgerald, 1995). Yopp and Stapleton (2008) suggested, "Educators face an unprecedented challenge as English Language Learners in public pre-kindergarten through 12th grade schools number more than 5 million, or 10.1% of the total enrollment" (p. 374). These numbers are up nearly 100 percent from a decade earlier (Short & Echevarria, 2004/2005). Furthermore, there are increasing numbers of migrant, Hispanic families moving from their native homeland to the Midwest and southeast regions of the United States (Lundgren & Morrison, 2003), and later placing their non-English speaking children in American public schools with high hopes that

their children will succeed in their academic and English language learning.

In her ethnographic study of ten Mexican immigrant families, Valdes (1996)

reported on the importance of schools discovering and valuing the cultural capital: prior learning, family traditions, and the social and linguistic experiences occurring daily within the household that shape their children's out-of-school learning. Educators show their respect for these new families in the United States while learning more about the richness and legacy of the Hispanic cultural values and family practices that ordinarily scaffold household approaches toward school learning. Classroom teachers are often not aware of the

Soy padre de un niño en su escuela. Como puedo yo aprender lo que mi niño está aprendiendo en la escuela? Yo quiero ayudar mi niños hacer buenos estudios en la escuela pero yo no hablo Ingles.

As a parent of a child in your school, how can I learn what my child is learning? I want to help my children do well at school but I do not speak English.

[Summary of Parent-Teacher Association Meeting Minutes, Mar. 2008]

cultural differences in literacy practices between parents and school; and such differences in the teaching of children serve as barriers to communication and academic learning (McCarthy, 2000). Further,

traditional school assumptions of instructional methods and literacy practices of Latino students are often inadvertently alienating, and do not recognize the potential value of English Language Learner students utilizing a bilingual literacy skills approach to learn the curriculum (Jimenez, 2001). Epstein and Dauber (1991) state, "When teachers differ culturally and educationally from their students or when they teach greater numbers of students, they are less likely to know the students' parents and therefore more likely to believe that parents are disinterested or uninvolved" (p. 298).

Since passage of the 1974 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Lau v. Nichols*, that instructed schools to provide an education comprehensible to limited English proficient students, Howe (1994) reported, "School administrators were still struggling to develop appropriate instructional programs to address the particular cultural needs of Hispanics" (p. 42).

As a classroom teacher for 7 ½ years at a K-3, inner city school with approximately a 17% Hispanic student population, I conversed in the Spanish language with many Hispanic families—at school and in their households, tutored their children after school or in the summer, and mediated on behalf of non-English speaking Hispanic parents at school Parent Teacher Association meetings, parent-teacher workshops or classroom breakfast meetings. From these dialogic events, it became apparent to me, as a

classroom teacher, that these parents often relied on their prior cultural experiences and school learning to scaffold their children's out-of-school literacy learning. As I spoke in the Hispanic parents' native dialect, the parents readily disclosed how they routinely enriched their children's literacy learning such as narrating in their native language historical accounts of ancestors, teaching their children to write letters in their native language to distant relatives still living in their native country, or having kitchen table discussions in both languages on life struggles, a family event or school experiences.

Porque no es posible que la escuela no pregunta por nuestra ayuda? Nosotros podemos soportar la escuela también. Tenemos que trabajar muchas horas y hay veces cuando no tenemos el tiempo para ayudar nuestros niños en completar la tarea. Es importante que la maestra obtenga una indicación de la manera que los padres pueden ayudar el niño en sus estudios académicos, porque hay veces que no sabemos cómo ayudar nuestros niños.

Why doesn't the school ask for our help? We can also support the school. We often need to work many hours to support our children, and we do not have the time to help our children complete their assigned homework. It is important that the teacher gain some idea of how the parent can help their child's learning at school because there are times when we do not know how to help our children.

[Summary of Parent-Teacher Classroom

A myriad of factors such as the parents' limited English language fluency; limited formal education, fear or intimidation of the classroom teacher, inflexible work hours, and unfamiliarity with the school's communication system, have often however impeded parental involvement in their children's academic education (Commins, 1989; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Sobel & Kugler, 2007). Speaking in their native language during visits to my

classroom or in visits to their household to tutor their children, these Hispanic parents echoed a recurring cultural theme—they viewed their primary role is to inculcate moral values in their children. Similarly, McCarthy (2000) reported Latino families emphasize the development of autonomous and conforming behaviors and parental monitoring. Conversely, these parents view their children's

school teacher as the knowledgeable, authority figure responsible for providing an academic education to their children (Anderson & Gunderson, 1997; Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Lindeman, 2001; Pena, Sep/Oct. 2000).

Thus, in the style of David Letterman, what follows are a list of top ten strategies that school administrators and classroom teachers can utilize to forge a mutually respectful, trusting relationship with migrant, Hispanic parents with the aim of supporting their children's literacy emergence. I arranged the following list based on my household visits and school conversations with numerous migrant, Hispanic parents over a seven-year period. Through dialogue in their native language, I discovered that a home-school connection focused on meaningful school learning would emerge from communication based on mutual respect and openness.

10) Have the children interview their parents and write a biography. The classroom teacher can guide student discourse in constructing open-ended questions to ask their parents about their family upbringing, their earlier school experiences, and favorite hobbies and interests. Back in the classroom, the children can work together to write, rewrite, and polish their accounts of their parents, which can later be bound in a class memoir honoring the children's family history. This literacy event offers a critical opportunity to strengthen the parent-school connection and empower the students' families to find a medium to express their voice and cultural heritage (Burkhart, 1995).

9) Hold periodic parent workshops. Consider the school library, a parent's home, a community resource center, or the classroom as the setting that empowers non-English speaking parents with bilingual intervention to freely share household and cultural practices for supporting their children's at home learning. Bilingual speaking parents can serve as facilitators or even workshop teachers to bridge

the language gap between classroom teachers and non-English speaking parents. Through continued dialogue, participants gain access to information about strategies used in the classroom and household to teach literacy and mathematics, and contribute their cultural voice to how literacy learning experiences are orchestrated in the classroom. Within this venue, parents can learn and practice the English language without fear or embarrassment (Enz, 1995; Sobel & Kugler, 2007).

8) Start a parent-student recognition program that involves the parents' native language. Seize opportunities to send home a hand-written note, in the parents' native language that highlights their children's special effort or achievement, or to express your appreciation to the parent for their act of volunteerism or support to the school. On a recurring basis, use the school newsletter to broadcast your parents' involvement. Using letters and written notes creates an informal way of communication with parents that acknowledges cultural preferences for communication via personal connections. (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005; Howe, 1994).

7) Host a Family Stories Night. Schedule an evening that allows parents and their children to visit the classroom and share a special family story in person—in their native language. Arrange beforehand for their bilingual child or a parent to translate the story so that everyone can internalize the significance of the parent's message embedded in the story. Similarly, the classroom teacher could arrange for parents to have written their family stories in a journal and later have their children or someone read aloud and translate the story in class. Alongside, the presentation of a family album provides a visual depiction of the family and of important events and memories in their lives. Parents gain greater voice in their children's school learning and the dialogue serves to promote respect and understanding for people (Finnegan, 1997; Meoli, 2001).

6) At the start of the school year, let Hispanic parents know that your school and classroom value dual-language learning. With the aid of a bilingual parent liaison, use an Open House, parent-teacher workshop, or bilingual newsletters to highlight ways in which English Language Learners are encouraged to use their native language to express their ideas, questions, and critical thinking during classroom discussions and student assessments (Estrada, Gomez, & Ruiz-Escalante, 2009).

5) Show parents how they can help, express your beliefs that parents are vital to their children's school learning! It may take a while—perhaps, several parent-teacher events on weekday evenings and weekends to gain their trust and confidence to build a meaningful home-school relationship. However, this is what Latino families look for—a classroom teacher whose words and actions show a commitment toward their children's success at school and toward the parents gaining knowledge about the school's operations and being treated as an equal partner (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Holman, 1997).

4) Redefine our traditional views of parental involvement. Often, Hispanic parents, based on their own upbringing, focus on the moral development of their children and place the burden of responsibility for academic teaching on the classroom teacher. Some parents use everyday experiences such as singing traditional family melodies, planning and cooking a family dinner, or calculating costs while grocery shopping. Although some non-English speaking parents may have a limited degree of English language fluency, they sit with their children and use the Spanish language to converse with their children about a storybook (written in their native language) or about their children's day at school (Pena, Sep/Oct 2000; Vandegrift & Greene, 1992).

3) Meet families where they are—in their household or neighborhood. With the aid of a bilingual parent, consider doing at the beginning part of the school year a household visitation. Visits can help classroom teachers better understand their students' social circumstances such as family and work history, use of code-switching during family discourse, practice of religious traditions, and family and community networks. At the very least, parent-teacher dialogue can help erase misconceptions (Allen, 2008; Ginsberg, 2007; McIntyre, Kyle, Moore, Sweazy, & Greer, 2001).

2) Acknowledge parents as their children's first teacher. In your efforts to reach out to migrant, non-English speaking parents seek to learn, with the aid of a Spanish-speaking parent or an interpreter, of how the family household and their cultural heritage serve as an important foundation and a familiar setting for their children's out-of-school literacy learning. Be open minded to the ways in which the parent ordinarily nurtures their child's physical, mental and emotional growth even before the child walked into your classroom (De La Cruz, 1999; Flood, Lapp, Tinajero, & Nagel, 1995; Koskinen & Shockley, 1994). Having created a foundation that values the cultural knowledge and experience of migrant, Hispanic families, we present the following strategy as the capstone for connecting with non-English speaking parents one culturally relevant deed at a time.

1) Become collaborators, advocates alongside migrant, Hispanic families dedicated to school reform. Our mantra that is displayed on school hallways and advertised at school wide events needs to spell change. As educators, we need to know that Hispanic families view education as the catalyst to their children's future success; they are concerned about classroom conditions, overcrowding and dropout rates. Not satisfied with the status quo, Latino families are looking to us, the educators to help them better understand the educational system and ways of

making changes to traditional teaching practices. What we do and how we do it in the classroom must offer migrant, non-English speaking students equitable opportunities to engage and succeed in a rigorous and culturally relevant educational environment (Wadsworth & Remaley, 2007).

As teachers and parents begin to openly communicate and work together to connect school and at-home literacy practices, meaningful partnerships can become the framework for promoting student success (Paratore, 2005). Sobel and Kugler (2007) proposed that in an immigrant-rich environment, traditional approaches toward building parental involvement must go beyond business as usual—personal contact must occur, beyond one or two interactions with a faculty member. In forging relationships between the home and school, Evers, Lang, and Smith (2009) stipulated that efforts to link classroom literacy learning with the student's household experiences, such as their parent's written stories, could demonstrate a respect and appreciation for culturally diverse families.

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