

## Dismay and Disappointment: Parental Involvement of Latino Immigrant Parents

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Parental involvement in schools has become more popular over the past decade due to Goals 2000 and research suggesting that student academic success increases when parents are included in the education of their children. Although researchers have examined the issue of parents and schools, limited research on parental involvement has been conducted within immigrant communities. Latino immigrant parents within a predominantly Latino community in California were interviewed. Although the community has strong Latino roots, these immigrant parents believed the schools do not listen or care to listen to their needs as parents. The parents in this study desired to be a part of their children's education, but forces within their children's school prevented them from doing so. The parents wished that teachers would be available to speak about grades, be able to find interpreters during open house and at other times throughout the school day, and communicate with the parents when their child is in need of assistance. Due to the apparent walls that had been established within the school's structure, the parents in this study felt abandoned and helpless while trying to gain information regarding their children's education. Parents in this study were so passionate about their stories that they pleaded with the researcher to let their story be heard in the researchers' teacher education courses so future teachers would know how immigrant parents felt.

**KEY WORDS:** parental involvement; Latino immigrant parents; barriers to student achievement.

Many researchers and schools are tackling the issue of parental involvement as a means to increase student achievement in schools. However, parental involvement is more than the government, or a school, implementing a program to include more parents in the life of the school. The implementation of parental involvement strategies involves looking at the diverse nature of the student body and recognizing that the community around the school also needs to be examined while discussions of parental involvement strategies are being formulated. This article addresses the search of a Latino community in Southern California for school administrators to listen to community needs. However,

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before summarizing the findings, previous research in this area needs to be examined.

### DIVERSITY AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Fuller and Olsen (1998) argued that, if schools are to enrich parental involvement programs, then the school "must consider cultural and economic differences among families." By creating a network of site-specific programs, teachers would be able to recognize differences that may contribute to the knowledge base of each student. One recommendation that Fuller and Olsen support is having bilingual advocacy groups to monitor schools' decisions on behalf of the parents. Other suggestions include learning about the families' belief systems and asking parents what they are interested in for their children's education before developing long-range goals for the school or making changes in curriculum. By taking a closer at look students' families, teachers would gain a better understanding of the needs and development of their students.

Research by Moll and colleagues (Moll, 1992; Moll and Diaz, 1993; Moll and Gonzalez, 1997; Moll, Velez-Ibanez, Greenberg, and Rivera, 1990) promotes the idea of collaborating with teachers to conduct field studies regarding their language minority (LM) students. When classroom teachers conduct field research on their students, they become the learners and not the accustomed facilitators of knowledge. Moll and Gonzalez (1997) stated:

Once teachers entered households as "learners," as researchers seeking to construct a template for understanding and tapping into the concrete life experiences of their students, the conventional model of home visits was turned on its head. No attempt would be made to "teach" parents or to visit for other school-related reasons. (p. 101)

Moll and colleagues demonstrate that teachers develop a different perspective when they are in the field researching families. Delpit (1995) spoke of educators' "ignorance of community norms" as being devastating to the development of children.

When teachers desire to institute parent education courses for their students' families, Delpit said: "While the intentions of these programs are good, they can only be truly useful when educators understand the realities with which such parents must contend and why they do what they do."

In Boston, Delpit found that Latino parents and their children's teachers were involved in "yelling matches" concerning bringing children to their classrooms before the school day officially began. What looked like the apparent disregard for the teachers' requests (that all children remain on the playground before school) was actually a misinterpretation on the teachers' part regarding how these Latino women viewed the school and its teachers. The women felt that the school was an extension of their home, and that the teachers served as

surrogate mothers. If the children were left outside, the parents viewed this as parallel to child abuse and a "disregard for the children's welfare." A suggested solution could have been for the school to invite parents to discuss the issue so the school would understand the view of the children's families. Although problems may have been avoided in this situation, some schools have made positive impacts with their school-home connections.

### SCHOOLS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

For many teachers and administrators, parental involvement is centered on those parents that are "able to attend"; those who do not, are seen as "uncaring" (Jones and Valez, 1997; Ramirez, 1996, 1997, 1999). By implication, parents of low socioeconomic standing are unable to attend school functions because they simply do not desire to be a part of their children's education. Pardini (1995) states that data support the findings that parents are often uninformed about how to be involved year to year and thus are uninformed about what is expected of their child. However, some schools have taken the initiative to involve parents actively and to seek out parents who may be considered unable to attend.

Northrop High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, has built a program within an urban school that tries to include parents actively within their PTSA (Parent-Teacher-Student Association). Issues that the PTSA are working on include recognizing the diversity of the school and the lack of transportation that discourages parents from attending PTSA functions. To address this problem, the school initiated *On Your Turf*, which includes neighborhood meetings. The PTSA has gained state and national recognition for its endeavors (Rioux and Berla, 1993).

The Baldwin Park Unified School District in California has initiated the Love, Leadership, and Literacy program. Because it is in a predominantly impoverished Latino community (92% of the participating families are of Latino heritage), many policymakers felt that such an environment would not produce active parental involvement. Based on a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Baldwin Park Unified School District was funded under the Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools (FIRST). The program that Baldwin Park initiated focused efforts on at-risk students.

Baldwin Park parents were consulted on how to best handle the grant and what would improve the education of their child. Since 1992, student assessments have been given, and reading and language development improved only slightly, whereas gains in math were statistically significant. One possible reason that the reading and language scores have lagged is because it often takes second language learners several years to become proficient in a target language. The parents, students, and teachers who are a part of the program have

reported that the project is rewarding and contributes to the development of the students.

To reduce demands placed on teachers or school personnel for directing parental involvement programs, De La Salle Institute, an all-male Catholic high school in Chicago, has begun the Proud Parent Group for the parents of incoming freshmen. Teachers have commented that they "do not have the time" to engage parents and participate in parental involvement endeavors (Ramirez, 1996). At De La Salle, parents of seniors act as mentors for incoming parents of freshmen to address concerns that the new parents might have. Since the inception of this project, there have been increases in parental attendance at school activities, in freshman student attendance, and in freshman grades compared to years when the program was not used. Parents and teachers who were asked to explain the increases responded that the parents and teachers now act as partners in the student's life and homework (Colletti, 1993).

Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990) found schools that have identified the needs of their language minority populations. The six Southwestern schools investigated showed similar traits regarding the promotion of LM students through valuing students' language and culture, high expectations, knowledge of LM methods, staff development, a variety of courses for LM students, counseling programs, staff member commitment, and parental involvement. Although many of the schools exhibited growth in the academic performance of their LM students, the contributing factor was the schools' knowledge of the student population and the culture of their families.

Another LM program that has an active parental involvement program is *El Instituto Familiar* in Santa Ana, California. The institute is located in an urban middle school; it initially involved 10–15 parents, but over 5 years has involved over 100 parents. The parents are active in policymaking, taking and teaching classes for parents, and mobilization of parents for school and community matters.

As these programs suggest, some schools have made parental involvement an important part of students' education. Individually, teachers have developed ways that students and parents can interact with one another at home and in the classroom (Adenika-Morrow, 1996; Bradley, 1997; VanSciver, 1995).

The research being conducted in the United States has contributed to an increased awareness of parental participation in schools. Although much of this research supports increasing levels of parental involvement, future studies need to address teacher attitudes and how teachers interact with parents. Specifically, researchers need to look at how schools interact with immigrant families and the issue of parental involvement. This study looked at Latino families and their stories about dealing with their children's schools.

## METHOD

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to determine the concerns of immigrant Latino parents regarding their children's schools. From my experience as an elementary substitute teacher, full-time high school teacher, and researcher, I discovered many Latino immigrant families with concerns about their children's schools. For the purpose of this study, I interviewed parents from a predominantly Latino community in Southern California.

### *Setting and Participants*

The community where the study took place is predominantly Latino. Approximately 90% of the community is made up of Latino people who come from various countries in Latin America. Most of the community members are either recent or second-generation immigrants. The community is mixed regarding socioeconomic standing, but a majority (80%) of the children attending public schools receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Leticia (fictitious name), a parent volunteer who had been nominated by her peers to be in charge of the school district's parent organization, recruited the participants for the study. Leticia asked if parents would be willing to share their stories with a faculty member from the local university. Many parents volunteered, but only a few were able to make the first meeting. The meeting was held in a karate studio owned by Leticia and her husband in the community where the parents live. Since more parents were willing to be interviewed, second and third meetings were held to accommodate all the parents who wished to participate. In all, 29 females and 14 males participated in this study. I decided to interview the parents in large groups rather than individually due to constraints on the parent's time and the familiarity the parents felt with one another. Since they did not know me, I felt the participants would be more comfortable speaking among their peers.

Allowing time for conversation before the formal interview seemed to develop a level of rapport with the participating teachers. Leticia ordered coffee, juice, and cookies so the parents would feel at ease. At this point, I mingled with the participants and asked for assistance from an interpreter to communicate with monolingual Spanish-speaking parents. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) saw rapport as essential in the qualitative process because it allows "clients to feel sufficiently comfortable to disclose information." For the purpose of qualitative research, rapport "is a distance-reducing, anxiety-quieting, trust-building mechanism" used primarily to benefit the researcher so the participant feels comfortable speaking about their culture (p. 94). Rapport enhances trust, and by the researcher talking little and listening a lot, the participants are prompted to

speak more (Wolcott, 1990). I wanted the parents to feel they could trust me. Some of the parents were concerned that I would report them to their child's principal, so I needed to reinforce, more than once, that their identities would not be revealed.

When we began the interview, I asked the parents, "Tell me about your relationships with your children's school." This allowed the parents to explore their beliefs, and then I followed with other appropriate questions. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) believe that this form of open-ended interviewing is a way to maintain the qualitative process, as opposed to shaping the questions based on a rigid interview guide. Although interview questions were established ahead of time, they were used to explore other avenues when I wanted further clarification.

I videotaped the interviews (permission was received from each informant) and took notes to document the response of participants on their views of their relationship with their children's school. The interviews took an average of 2-3 hours, and the recordings were transcribed. After the transcription of the interviews, I then conducted member checks during another meeting to clarify statements and to allow the parents to include further information if they desired. All names in the results are fictitious.

## INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Many researchers comment that there needs to be a time when limiting or ending data collection is necessary. The researcher at some point needs to focus on the important data because the human mind cannot remember all the data collected or the data become saturated (Bogdan and Bicklen, 1992; Eisner, 1991; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Sadler, 1981). For this study, data were organized and coded while the research was taking place. While coding the data, three themes emerged: communication, expectations, and accountability.

### *Communication*

In the predominantly Spanish-speaking community, the school board meetings did not offer language support for Spanish speakers. One parent became so frustrated they brought their own translator to the next meeting. Parents reiterated that, although they voiced their objection to the school board, it was not until a principal voiced concern over the lack of a translator that the school board meetings finally offered services. The parents were concerned that they were not receiving enough information due to the lack of a translator. Two parents stated that since translators have been available, more parents are attending the meetings. However, parents felt frustrated at what seemed to be a

lack of communication occurring at the school sites outside the school meetings.

Parents stated that, at open house or other meetings, teachers did not have time for the parents to speak with them one on one. Often, the open house is a time when parents come to the school and go to each of their child's classes for 5 minutes. They are then asked to go to the next classroom. At times, the child's class was not physically open because the teacher decided not to attend the open house.

Much frustration was seen on the faces of the parents when they spoke about the open house. The parents desired teachers to be present at the open house so parents would be able to speak to the teachers about their child's performance. Parents stated that some teachers spoke Spanish, but most teachers did not. Although this was not a major issue for the parents, they did wish that, if teachers were unable to speak Spanish, an interpreter would be available. When asked if all the schools were unfriendly, the parents said, "No. Only a few." "Some principals have learned Spanish, and that makes things easier because they know how difficult it is to learn another language." Or, as Juan, a father of a high school boy stated: "It does make it easier if the school people speak Spanish, but I would like it if an interpreter was present as well." The need to speak Spanish in a primarily Spanish-speaking community may be an issue that the schools should address. However, just getting the word out about the open house and other events seems to be problematic as well.

In one school of over 2,500 students, only 300-400 notices were sent to parents' homes regarding the date of the open house. Leticia, the parent organizer who has children at one school, stated she knew how many were sent out because she and other parents took it on themselves to make up the flyers and distribute them. The parents who organized the flyer distribution were unaware of the reason the school was not going to send out the information. When asked how many of the parents who were interviewed knew of the open house, a majority stated that they had. Most stated they had received a flyer, whereas three stated they happened to be at school the morning of the open house and were told at the front office about the meeting. A few (five) were unaware because they were told the information was sent home during the first week of school with their children. Maria, a recent immigrant from Guatemala, stated: "How am I suppose to know this information when we just arrived after the school year started? I did not know anything about the Open House, or what I am suppose to do at it."

The presumption that parents are aware of traditions in this country is an interesting topic. The parents in this group felt they were unaware of the many traditions of school life. Many of the parents felt it was not their place to attend or to go to the schools for they felt the teachers were better suited to teach and educate their children. In the parental cultures, the school was a place for learn-

ing by the child, and parents met with teachers only when sent a personal invitation. The personal invitations that were sent to the parents came directly from each teacher through the mail or by a phone call.

A parent did state that a first-year teacher sent out personal invitations to all her parents. At the open house, this teacher had the largest turnout of parents at the school. The parents appreciated the extra effort that the teacher exhibited and wanted to meet the teacher. They felt that, since the teacher took the time to write each parent's name on an invitation, then they, as parents, should respect the teacher's wishes and come to the open house. Yvonne, a single mother of two, attended the open house although she had difficulty in finding child care. She stated: "I really didn't learn anything new, but meeting the teacher and seeing my daughters work on the board made it worthwhile." Although the teacher was unable to spend a lot of time with each parent, parents whose children have this teacher found the teacher to be warm and sensitive to their children. During our discussion about this teacher, Victor, a parent with a son in another class, shared that other teachers were making negative comments about the teacher who personally addressed invitations to the parents for the open house. Victor asked me: "Why would teachers do this to their coworkers?"

### ***Expectations***

The parents seemed to feel there was an expectation of them as parents with which many felt uncomfortable. Armando from Mexico shared: "I have to work at night, and teachers are telling me I have to come to a gathering at the school at night. I can't do both." Some parents were excited about learning about ways to help their children. Others did not realize there were items that were prepared by the district to assist them as parents.

Leticia stated that there is a parent training folder that suggests how parents can work with their children. However, not all parents have seen the folder or know that it exists. The folder contains approximately 200 pages and is written in English and Spanish. Not one of the parents had knowledge of this folder. Esmeralda from El Salvador commented: "If the teachers and schools want us to do these things, why haven't we seen this [folder]?" Leticia then stated that not all schools have the folder. The parents felt that the schools expected them (the parents) to act a certain way and perform certain tasks. However, the parents also felt that teachers expected different types of things from their children.

Many of the parents felt that teachers have lower expectations for their students than for students who are from schools with a higher socioeconomic base. The parents also believed that the teachers do not have high expectations for the parents as well. Ygnacio, a father of two children, complained that his child was receiving grades lower than 40% on her tests, but the homework turned in was correct. Although the homework was perfect, the teacher suspected the

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parent, or another person, was doing the homework for the student because the teacher did not believe the student was capable of performing that well on the homework. The parent, in broken English, complained that the teacher was accusing the child of cheating. Therefore, the father hired a tutor to teach the child about testing strategies, and the student's test grades went from failing to A's. The father felt it was not up to him to teach or to get outside assistance if the teacher is not capable of teaching. After seeing the improvement, the teacher informed the student, "It's about time you are picking it [the subject] up." The father then wanted the child to be placed in gifted classes, and after 1 year before getting the child tested, the child was placed in honors after the testing revealed the student's intelligence was above average. Ygnacio was frustrated with the school and the teacher; he felt the school looked the other way when he complained to the principal. The principal advised Ygnacio to speak to the teacher to try to resolve the issue. Ygnacio believes that schools are "undermining the growth of students" because of the lower expectations teachers and schools have for Latino students and, as Ygnacio clearly stated, "especially those of us who cannot speak English well."

Other parents had similar situations occur, where their children were often given lower-level courses because of the expectation that they could not perform. Esmeralda exclaimed:

My child knows more about the subjects than I do. But when she came home and told me she was told to take a slower course, I immediately called the counselor. The counselor told me it was in Laura's [Esmeralda's daughter] best interest to take this one course. However, Laura told me she had taken a test to take the higher, honors course. When I told this to the counselor, she said, "we didn't give Laura permission to take that test." My Laura was then placed in the higher class.

The teachers also have an expected attitude toward parents. One teacher told her middle-school students: "If your parents come to my classroom, you will automatically lose 20 points from your scores." When word of this got back to the parents (approximately 6–7 months later), the teacher stated; "It was just a joke." When approached about the number of parents that she actually met with during these 6–7 months, the teacher stated: "Zero." The teacher then responded: "The parents need to turn off the TVs and take care of their kids."

The parents felt the teacher believed that they, as parents, did not care about their children. This was apparent when parents heard teachers mention that, if parents did not show up to the open house, "They didn't care about their kids." This upset many of the parents during the interviews because many, as stated above, never heard of the open house or had other difficulties attending the open house. Parents were also aware that only two advanced placement courses were offered at one of the high schools, whereas at a nearby school in a com-

munity with individuals of a higher socioeconomic level, over 15 advanced placement courses were offered. Maria stated: "It doesn't take an educated person to know that the schools don't expect much from our children." With the lack of motivation for children to do well, I wondered what the parents would want from future teachers.

When I asked parents what they would want out of me, a teacher educator, the parents stated that I needed to teach my preservice students that "You don't have to be untouchable [as a teacher], and that you can care and be a friend." When I asked them more questions about this, the parents stated: "As new people to this country, we feel we cannot ask questions [of the teachers or school officials] if we do understand the question." The parents were sensitive toward the issue of language. Their expectations from future teachers centered on themes of care and respect. The teachers should care that they are teachers, and that teaching is not "just a job." The parents were in agreement that often they felt like little children, being spoken down to. Therefore, they suggested to me that I teach my students how to "show respect toward other people." Another parent, Hector, asked me: "How do they [teachers] expect us to respect them, if they don't respect us?" As tears filled her eyes, Amelia stated:

The schools make me feel stupid because I have trouble with English, and all I want is for my children to do well in school. To become something better than I. All I wanted was for the teacher to write down what was due [homework], and they wouldn't do it for me.

Because of these frustrations, parents often feel trapped due to the comments of the teachers.

A teacher told a mother that her daughter was "retarded" and needed special education because she "doesn't say anything in class." The mother, through the assistance of an interpreter, asked the teacher: "If my daughter is retarded, why is she going to be judged on whether she can be awarded a green belt in karate next week?" The teacher persisted and asked the school counselor to test the child without consulting the parent. The student scored at grade level. The teacher then apologized to the parent. Although the parent was happy with the result, it took the counselor more than 3 months to test the child.

### ***Accountability***

The parents had many questions when they started to speak among themselves regarding teachers in this country. Parents were keenly aware that U.S. teachers were different from those in their native countries.

One parent stated that, in Mexico, teachers were more accountable toward parents because, if the parents desired, they were able to go to the school and discuss issues with the teachers. However, when I asked why as parents they

never went to their child's school here in the United States, the parents stated: "We haven't been invited." In the United States, parents felt that "the teachers can do anything they want, and don't have to answer to anyone." Emelia stated that, in Guatemala, students carried notebooks with them with homework and communication from the teachers. The teachers would write comments for the parents, and the parents would respond in the notebook. It was suggested by more than 10 parents that, in the United States, they often never saw homework that was completed until it was returned at the end of the school year, and at that point it was "too late to do anything" to help the students.

Parents also complained that the teachers expressed that Mexico was the same as Guatemala or El Salvador as far as culture, language, and customs. Gracelia, an immigrant in the late 1970s from El Salvador, felt alarmed when a teacher, during a class in which her son was enrolled, made light of the war in El Salvador. In class, the son spoke about his experience in El Salvador as a young boy, and the teacher responded, "Well, that wasn't a real war." Gracelia never did anything because she was afraid that her son would get into trouble if she said anything.

The parents also expected teachers to adhere to certain guidelines. Francisco, from Peru, asked: "Why do teachers accept messy work? If there is a doodle, they accept it. In my country, the child has to do the work over again." Francisco wanted the teacher to be accountable for taking sloppy work from his children. There was awareness that teachers accepted anything from students if they just did the work. He felt that if teachers were tested along with students about their knowledge, then maybe the teachers would become better teachers.

Many of the parents who felt frustrated had children in high school. When asked about their experience when their children were in kindergarten through grade 5, most of the parents stated that the teachers from kindergarten through grade 3 very warm and were interested in learning from the parents about their children. The parents smiled when they stated that the teachers were willing to stay and work with their students on grammar, math, and the like. The parents felt that the teachers at the K-3 level felt the parents were watching them and invited the parents to watch them teach. This accountability made the parents more relaxed with the teachers and the schools. There were some complaints, however, that teachers in K-3 would take their position to "extremes." One teacher would pull on the students' ears if the students were not doing what the teacher desired. This made many of the students afraid to speak in class (all students in the class were Spanish speakers). When asked when they heard of the incident, the parents stated: "At the end of the school year." When the parent asked their child why they never said anything, the child stated: "I was afraid that if I said anything, the teacher would get mad at me."

Another father felt accountable toward the school, and if there was to be any disciplinary actions taken, then the actions should be him. Rodrigo felt bad

because he arrived late to school with his daughter due to a family emergency. When he came back to the classroom with his daughter's lunch, his daughter was sitting in the corner. When he asked the teacher if his daughter did anything wrong, the teacher stated: "She was late to class, so she needs to sit in the corner." The father told the teacher to "punish me" for "something in the family needed to be cleared up." The teacher stated: "My policy is to have students be placed in the corner when their parents bring them late." The father went to the principal and reiterated the situation; the principal spoke to the teacher to "re-think" her policy. Although the father felt relieved that the principal intervened, the father still felt bad for parents whose English speaking skills were not as good as his, and he stated that his English was "very elementary."

One parent was aghast when she found out her child was suspended, and the school did not notify her until the child told her after not going to school the following Monday (the child was suspended on Friday after first period). The school did not inform her until the child told her mother that the reason she was not going to school was because she was suspended. The mother then called the school and wanted to speak to someone about her daughter. The school told her she could come and speak to the counselor "next week."

When parents were asked why they rarely spoke up regarding the issues they raised during the interview, all of the parents stated they were afraid that the school would retaliate in some way. Some feared deportation, although their children were born in the United States. Others feared their children would get in trouble or be expelled from school. The parents felt accountable toward some higher presence that made it possible for them not to be involved or ask questions. However, the parents felt that the schools and teachers are not accountable toward anyone. If a principal intervenes on the behalf of the parent, the parent then believes that their child will be subjected to much negativity from his or her teacher. By keeping one another accountable, some schools have adopted avenues to work with language minority communities and incorporating more parental involvement techniques.

Based on the interviews with the Latino immigrant parents and research in this area, certain conclusions and suggestions are made.

## CONCLUSION

The parents in this study wanted one thing from their children's schools: for the schools to listen. Parents were frustrated over the lack of communication from the school to the home. Often, parents were unaware of what the schools were doing with their children; at other times, parents were made responsible to contact other parents regarding school functions.

School-home communication within ethnic communities needs to be addressed to reveal what the needs are for these students and parents (Ramirez,

2000b). By providing bilingual professionals or volunteers to assist language minority families, many of the problems that do exist within school-home relations may subside. I found that my lack of ability to speak Spanish did not alarm any of the parents. In fact, when I tried to speak Spanish, the parents seemed to appreciate the effort; they smiled, corrected my Spanish, and laughed at some of the words I used. In teacher education, many of the secondary students that I teach do not wish to take the courses for the CLAD courses. Although the preservice teachers know their first job may be in an urban district where many students are second language learners, many do not wish to take language courses to learn a second language. Also, offering bilingual interpreters may not solve the issue of stereotyping that many of the parents in this study faced. When immigrant parents pled with me to teach my preservice teachers just to care about their students and their students' families, a powerful message may have been created. The parents in this study felt the teachers did not care about their students or the students' families. One teacher mentioned in this study went out of the way to contact and communicate with her students' parents before open house. Unfortunately, other teachers criticized the teacher for going above and beyond her duties as a teacher.

In researching immigrant families and education, we also need to research cultural differences. Parents noted that many teachers did not know the difference among Latino families. Many parents felt the teachers believed all of their parents came from Mexico. By not understanding the cultural and ethnic differences within the Latino population, teachers may have severe mishaps while addressing and communicating information to students and families. One teacher was unaware of the location of Guatemala, another teacher (according to the parent) felt indifferent toward the civil war in El Salvador, and another teacher celebrated Cinco de Mayo (May 5) as Mexican Independence Day (the actual date is September 16) in the classroom. These mistakes may be dismissed by school officials as "errors" (as one parent stated); however, to deny a person's cultural identity may cause further social distance between the school and home. If teachers and schools readily identified and celebrated the differences and made personal invitations to parents, the social distance gap may be shortened. An issue may be the way multicultural education courses have been taught in teacher education programs, and a move toward changing the way culture is taught should be examined (Ramirez, Autry, and Morton, 2000).

Some of the parents liked their children's schools, and offered me an invitation to attend some of their meetings. The schools where the invitations were given were in K-3 classrooms. When asked about middle and high schools, all the parents felt the schools and teachers informed the parents more at the K-3 level. At the high school level, teachers have more students, but their attitudes toward parents should be examined (Ramirez, 1999, 2000). By examining teachers' attitudes, a better understanding from the teachers' perspective may

assist in bridging the school-home gap. Bridging the school-home gap is needed to improve relationships with families. Many schools have created avenues for improving these conditions, as well as the parents during the interviews. Previous research and the interviews from these parents provided insights for suggestions in improving school-home relationships.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL-HOME RELATIONSHIPS

To promote better relationships between the school and language minority homes, researchers have suggested that the teachers develop practices to enhance human relationships with their student's families (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lucas, 1997; Moll, 1992; Moll et al., 1990, Moll and Diaz, 1993; Moll and Gonzalez, 1997).

Lucas (1997) reported that immigrant families want their children to succeed in school. The problem comes in dealing with a new system of education and feeling alone in the educational community. Other barriers include language, not knowing the impact of families on schooling in the United States, the possibility of parents not having formal schooling, lack of written literacy skills, the possibility of parents working more than one job (p. 134), and day care issues. Educators need to be aware that immigrant students may not have the same family structures to which they are accustomed. Lucas also mentioned that educators need to take into consideration (1) length of residence in the United States, (2) English language proficiency, (3) availability of support groups and bilingual staff, and (4) prior experience with parental involvement in schooling. These factors may assist the teacher in learning more about the parents, which may in turn diminish the feelings of "isolation" and "disrespect" that immigrant parents report (p. 133).

Lucas (1997, p. 141) also promoted the development of structures that would bridge the gap between the school and the home. These include (1) adult-student relationships, (2) student-student relationships, (3) adult-adult relationships with the schools, and (4) school-family relationships. His ideal school-family structure would include family English literacy projects, intake interviews and processes, home-school liaisons, parent centers, orientation workshops, and courses for parents (English as a second language [ESL], literacy, immigration issues). This could be accomplished if educators would

- Visit students' homes and communities to learn about the funds of knowledge in their families and cultures.
- Participate in community events and celebrations.
- Develop relationships with adults in the students' communities.
- Bring family members into the classroom.
- Offer classes and other activities for family members.

Hire and support the hiring of staff members (including community liaisons, bilingual/ESL coordinators, administrators, and teachers) from the language and cultural backgrounds of the students.

Through this interaction, teachers would better understand the dynamics of the family structure and allow more parental intervention in the students' interest. Lucas et al. (1990) conducted a study of six high schools that promote the achievement of language-minority students. In the study, eight common features were discovered within the schools that assisted in the academic achievement of the students. Among the eight, Lucas et al. found that parents of language minority students are encouraged to become involved in their children's education (p. 325). Many of the schools studied conducted parent meetings once or twice a month. In one school, the students performed plays in six languages, these plays dealt with educational topics. Other schools sponsored assemblies honoring students, invited motivational speakers, or served breakfast at times when parents would be able to attend. The schools would also have staff members who spoke the parent's native language call the parent regarding absences. One school also employed a community liaison who would teach ESL classes for the parents on the school campus. Due to these endeavors, students stated that the parents became more involved in activities and were supportive of the school.

Moll et al. (1990) conceded that implementation of his or other goals would be difficult to foster because teachers' attitudes toward language minority students and their parents are often negative. The negativity often stems from a lack of understanding of the community that the teacher is serving. Jones and Valez (1997) contributed this lack of understanding to the failure of the schools to take advantage of the "sociocultural capital" that is inherent in the close relationships between Latino children and their parents to promote academic achievement. However, schools also need to be aware that all Latino cultures do not exhibit the same traits (Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, and Epstein, 1995). Crawford (1997) argued that increasing parental involvement of LM students sustains gains in academic achievement, enhances English language skills, increases cognitive growth, improves behavior in school, enhances home-school relationships, produces more favorable attitudes toward school, and enhances self-esteem.

Conflicts may also arise when teachers' stereotypes regarding parents may exist due to experience and literature that support a specific way of dealing with a particular ethnic group. In their study, Carrasquillo and London (1993) discussed many of the ways to involve ethnic minority parents in their children's school. However, following the advice of these researchers uniformly could lead to stereotypes regarding the entire ethnic population. For example, they wrote: "Hispanic families are interested in the well being of their children, but

socioeconomic conditions in many instances do not allow them to fulfill their desire of providing the best for their children" (p. 42).

Valez-Ibanez and Greenberg (1992) addressed the issue of grouping Hispanic populations. They wrote:

We have suggested strongly that to compare "Hispanic" populations at the level of social, educational, and economic statistics by them creates a comparative "ecological" fallacy, which contributes to the creation of stereotypes rather than understanding. Rather each population must be placed within their appropriate historical, regional, and ecological niches in order to decipher the paradoxes and contradictions or relations between education, occupation, income, and schooling performances and completion.

The researchers mentioned above have a desire to enhance the relationship between the school and the home. If educators take a step forward in providing a positive working relationship with all parents, we may see an increase in parental participation and improved student success. This positive working environment includes schools communicating in the native languages of parents who speak limited English and providing for avenues that would increase the level of understanding of the cultural aspects of each ethnic group. Also, should schools desire to make an impact in the growth of parental involvement and student achievement, they would need to incorporate multicultural strategies to enhance the growth of their students. This is important because the literature shows a wide range of cultural beliefs among teachers who teach students from cultures other than their own. By combining these strategies, teachers would be exposed to the importance of families in education and possibly create an atmosphere that would allow teachers to learn about cultural aspects that contribute to the growth of student achievement (Hidalgo et al., 1995).

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