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Working Effectively With and Increasing the In-School Participation of Parents Whose Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds Differ from Those of the Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Working effectively with parents in the school setting is always a challenge. When the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of teachers and parents differ, the challenge becomes more complex. Washington and the nation as a whole are becoming more ethnically and linguistically diverse. Over 90 percent of recent immigrants come from non-English speaking countries, and many of these immigrants arrive with little or no formal education. Minority groups also have higher birth rates, and many native-born ethnic group members do not speak English in the home. These immigration and birth patterns are contributing to the increase in the linguistic diversity of our public schools. This should be considered as a reason to better understand how to more effectively include these parents in school activities. Teachers are busy people, and establishing positive relationships with second language parents is a win-win situation for both parents and teachers. It is definitely worth the time and effort it takes. The authors of this article are primarily young teachers from schools with diverse student populations who encounter these critical issues of culture and language every day in their classrooms. This article provides some ideas for effectively increasing the participation of non-English speaking parents in the schools.

Washington and the nation as a whole are becoming a more ethnically and linguistically diverse society. Over 90 percent of recent immigrants come from non-English speaking countries, and many of these immigrants arrive with little or no formal education. Minority groups also have higher birth rates, and many native-

born ethnic group members do not speak English in the home. These immigration and birth patterns are contributing to the increase in the linguistic diversity of our public schools. This is especially true in the West and in urban areas where English Language Learner (ELL) students are concentrated (The Office of the State Super-

intendent of Public Instruction, 2003). These ELL students have a higher risk of academic failure. When children with very little previous exposure to the English language enter the public schools, they are often unable to profit fully from instruction in English. The ELL students tend to have lower levels of academic performance in math and reading, higher rates of retention and much higher dropout rates than their English-fluent peers. As the number of ELL students in public schools continues to grow and meeting higher academic standards is required, issues relating to the needs of these students and their academic progress are receiving greater scrutiny. Some of these issues can be addressed by looking at what the research describes as effective instructional and school-wide practices. ELL students have even a greater challenge in the English-speaking public schools due to multiple learning barriers. It is therefore essential to implement research-based instructional and school-wide practices in order to improve their learning.

In January 2003, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington published an article titled, *Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools*. Some of the studies reviewed research that has been conducted on this topical area, while others examined high performing schools in specific settings and locations. From this body of research, evidence supports this claim regarding the significance of the school-family partnership. The Washington State school improvement specialists identified nine characteristics of high performing schools (OSPI, 2003). The nine characteristics are as follows:

1. A clear and shared focus
2. High standards and expectations for all students
3. Effective school leadership
4. High levels of collaboration and communication
5. Curriculum, instruction and assessments aligned with state standards
6. Frequent monitoring of learning and teaching
7. Focused professional development

8. A supportive learning environment
9. High levels of family and community involvement

Of these nine characteristics there are several which can be supported by teachers in their schools and classrooms. They include collaboration and communication, aligning curriculum to support cultural diversity, culturally sensitive assessment, and creating a supportive learning environment. For the purposes of this article, the ninth characteristic has been identified as being significant and essential for teachers to explore for the purposes of both ELL and English-speaking students. A new challenge for teacher preparation programs will be to reinforce the ninth characteristic and effectively instruct new teachers to promote high levels of family and community involvement.

New teachers are entering contemporary classrooms that include many students from cultures other than that of the new teacher (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). These new teachers report on standard follow-up evaluations from their university that one of the missing elements in their teacher education programs is working with families. As a result, beginning teachers feel unprepared to encourage family involvement (Swick & McKnight, 1989). Until the past few years, most state teacher preparation and certification programs did not require that teacher education programs include standards or courses on family involvement issues. The Harvard Family Study Report (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997) concluded that only 22 states had parent involvement in their credentialing standards. California is the first and only state that has enacted legislation mandating prospective teachers and certified educators "to serve as active partners with parents and guardians in the education of children" (California Education Code 44291.2, 1993). California enacted this legislation because parent involvement research indicates higher student achievement and satisfaction with schools and because professional educators and parents/guardians may be from diverse cultures.

The family has a tremendous influence on a child's achievement in school. From early child-

hood through high school, the family's role is a critical contribution to a child's academic achievement (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000). Although schools have been urged to be more effective and more productive, the out-of-school influences on academic learning have escalated in importance. Even in places where the school day and school year have been lengthened, the amount of time children spend in school during the first eighteen years of their lives is small (18% of waking hours) compared to the time they spend with their family and the broader community. Current research and research gathered over the years has indicated with reasonable certainty that the family's influence on student achievement has a substantial impact. Although poverty may statistically predict lower school performance, families still may provide a stimulating, language rich, supportive environment as well as, model healthy relationships (International Board of Education, 2002). These aspects of a well-rounded education may be a more powerful predictor of student success than simply the family's economic status.

Talking and playing with infants, reading bedtime stories with toddlers, playing math and reading games with elementary school students, helping middle school students with their homework, and establishing appropriate boundaries for teenagers are all examples of these practices and are foundations for success in school (NWREL, 2000). The benefits for students when families are actively involved with their child's learning include:

1. Higher grades and test scores
2. Better attendance and more homework completed
3. Fewer placements in special education
4. More positive attitudes and behaviors
5. Higher graduation rates
6. Greater enrollment in post-secondary education
7. Increased motivation
8. Lower rates of suspension
9. Decreased use of drugs and alcohol
10. Fewer instances of violent behavior
11. Greater enrollment rates in post-secondary education

(Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997)

There is substantial pressure in schools for children to achieve at a higher rate. At the school, district, state, and national level, educators are charged with the academic improvement of all students. The reality is that children need to graduate from school with a strong ability to read, write, calculate and solve a myriad of problems using a disciplined method that leads to the solution. As schools have been pressed to become more effective and productive, family and community influences on academic learning have escalated in importance (IBE, 2002).

Research that was published in 2003 by Washington State school improvement specialists defines family involvement as a general term used to describe a myriad of activities, projects, and programs that bring parents, family members, and other stakeholders together to support student learning as well as those activities that take place within the schools (OSPI, 2003). These connections traditionally have ranged from parent-teacher-student organization meetings, back-to-school open houses, parent-teacher conferences, fund raising and chaperoning school events to in-class volunteering, and parent education programs. Currently, the literature has extended the definition of family involvement to include other types of involvement such as shared decision-making and home-based support of student learning. Families and other adults can be involved in the education of young people through a variety of activities that demonstrate the importance of education and show support and encouragement of students' learning without having to physically spend time at the schoolhouse (OSPI, 2003). Epstein (1997) and her colleagues at Johns Hopkins University have developed a framework that includes six types of involvement for this type of comprehensive partnership between school and families:

1. Parenting: Helping families establish home environments to support children as learners
2. Communications: The use of effective

- forms for school-to-home and home-to-school communications
3. **Volunteering:** The recruitment and organization of the school's volunteer program
 4. **Learning at Home:** Helping families assist their children with homework and recognizing other learning at home opportunities
 5. **Decision-making:** Including parents, students, and community members in the school decision-making process
 6. **Collaborating with the Community:** The identification and integration of resources and services from the community

The federal government insists that schools and their districts adopt this theory regarding the relationship between family involvement and student achievement. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) renamed the No Child Left Behind Act, when signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002, stated that all schools that receive Title I dollars, must have a written parent involvement policy. The policy must be developed jointly with, and distributed to, families of school children. The policy must ensure that there are successful strategies that encourage and sustain active parent involvement in every school. Because research has indicated the importance of the relationship between family and school, it should be a shared responsibility between home, school, and community for the development and learning of students (Epstein, 1997). The responsibility for initiating this kind of partnership lies primarily with schools and districts. Epstein confirms that the strongest and most consistent predictors of parent involvement at school and home are the specific school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide parent involvement.

As these schools and teachers design their approaches to these partnerships, they may want to consider some additional findings that Epstein and her colleagues have documented in, *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action* (1997). They found that:

1. Schools with more affluent populations, on average, experience more family involvement.
2. Schools with higher percentages of students on free and reduced-price lunches face more challenges to building positive partnerships.
3. Contacts with families tend to be about problems students are having in schools.
4. Parents and families care about their children. They just vary in their current capacity to be strong partners with schools.
5. Teachers and administrators want to improve the outcomes for students, though they vary in their current capacity to reach out to families and the community.
6. If the school does not actively seek the attendance of single parents, fathers, working couples, and families whose first language isn't English, these groups are unlikely to participate in events and volunteer activities.

The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics conducted a survey in 1996 titled, *Survey on Family and School Partnerships in Public Schools, K-8*. The survey found that within schools that had less than 5% of minority enrollment, the amount of parent involvement was higher with actual percentages indicating 80% assisting with fundraising, 67% volunteering outside the classroom, 60% volunteering within the classroom and 40% of parents attending parent-teacher association meetings. In schools with 50% or more minority enrollment the results were as follows: 45% assisted in fundraising, 38% volunteered outside the classroom, 30% volunteered inside the classroom and 24% attended parent-teacher association meetings (NCES, 1996).

Approximately 20% of U.S. students are English language learners (ELL). Of these students, over 40% are immigrants and refugees from around the world. These ELL families have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (McLeod, 1995). Research shows that these ELL

students are much more likely to overcome academic challenges and positive attitude toward education in general when their parents become active participants in the educational process. Despite finding that they benefit from parental involvement in school, some researchers suggest that most of their parents are not actively involved in their child's education (Henderson, 1988). As a result of these findings, the following barriers to effective inclusion of "differently-cultured" parents were identified and associated solutions suggested.

WILLINGNESS OR CAPABILITY

Many educators working in schools with large ELL populations have concerns about what drives parental participation in school. Is the catalyst the parents' basic willingness to participate, or is it their lack of basic skills required to participate in academics that determines their level of participation? According to Martinez (1997) there are barriers that limit the extent to which ELL or migrant parents can be involved in their child's education. The lack of English proficiency prevents these parents from effectively communicating with teachers or helping their children with homework. Limited educational skill becomes an even greater factor when helping their older children with schoolwork. In addition, lack of time (a barrier mentioned above) presents a particular hardship to migrant workers who enter the field before dawn and return home late in the evening. Martinez (1997) also reports that poverty, hunger, and uncertainty fill their lives. After one field is picked, it means a trip to another location, often a new county or a new state. The major reason for migration of these populations has always been economics. Families base decisions about when and where to move on the length of a particular season, timing of crops, changing agricultural conditions, rate of pay, and available housing. These migrations based on economics are a matter of survival, and education is not as urgent a priority. In many ELL households, parents are not able to help their children educationally because they have to work two or three jobs many times leaving the young children at home without adult

supervision.

Most parents want their children to get the best education that they can and they try to support their children to the best of their ability. Language barriers, the parents' educational background, and their time availability can be major obstacles to many ELL children in progressing academically in school. A unique barrier to participating in school for some Southeast Asian parents (rural Laotians, Hmong, and Montagnards from Vietnam) is their lack of exposure to any writing system prior to their immigration. That will also make it extremely difficult for them to learn English as a second language (Treuba, Cheng, & Ima, 1993).

CULTURAL BARRIERS AND DIFFERENT BELIEF SYSTEMS

Barriers are situated in schools as well as in families. Although one can infer that that it is the school's responsibility to recognize each of these barriers and adjust accordingly, there is also a proclivity to reinforce a deficit model with regard to the family environment. Schools do need to do a better job of learning about, recognizing, and affirming all that families do to educate their children, especially when it is not easily recognizable by the dominant school culture. It should be a two-way street. Values and norms embedded in language, religion, philosophy, custom, and social organization forms, such as family, are important variables affecting people's behavior (Treuba, Cheng, & Ima, 1993). Parents of similar cultural and social values gain easier acceptance and access to the school environment, while families with diverse ethnic background must adapt to the dominant school culture to become an advocate for their child. The nature of this process puts culturally diverse parents at a disadvantage for participating in the classroom, from the very first day of school (Delcado-Gaitan, 1991).

Many ELL families believe it is the school's responsibility to educate their children; for these families, parent participation in education is a new cultural concept (Simich-Dudgeon, 1986). These parents want the best for their children, but they believe that their involvement may be

counterproductive and improper. Some parents report that someone other than themselves inspires their children to succeed in school. Many Asian parents view teachers as professionals with authority over their children's schooling; they believe that parents are not supposed to interfere with the school process. Some Asian parents regard teachers who seek parent involvement as incompetent (National School Public Relations Association, 1993).

Cultural experiences and ethnic proverbs are also important factors for determining parent involvement. Ouk (1993) has analyzed Cambodian proverbs to show how they help form the attitude of Cambodian parents toward school. As examples:

1. *"When not invited, it is not appropriate to attend; when not asked, it is not proper to answer."* If parents are expected to be at a school event, it is important that they be invited to participate. A simple notification may not convey the importance of their attendance.
2. *"Silence is better than speech."* Americans believe in freedom of speech. Cambodians believe in freedom of silence. Silence is a sign of humility and deference, a way to show one's respect for others.

Lack of trust and ownership because of cultural differences and beliefs discourage parent participation in school. Sahar El-Shafie (2004) reports that having a Muslim child attend a school where the values of the school don't necessarily match that of the child's Islamic upbringing isolate parent involvement. They feel that their Islamic identity is lost in a non-Muslim society.

PATTERNS OF ACCULTURATION

Acculturation involves the adaptation of minority cultures to the dominant culture, which entails developing and understanding the beliefs, emotions and behaviors of the new culture. The

degree of involvement of parent depends on the stage of acculturation. Upon first arriving in the United States, many refugee and immigrant families experience a culture shock that creates frustration and fear, especially among those who come from the third world countries (Scarcella, 1990). Immigrants and refugees generally come to the United States in search of better opportunities and plan to stay here to obtain them. Although both immigrants and refugees may have the same ultimate goal in mind in coming to the United States, refugee families often will have come for their survival and without much preparation. Until these refugees have settled down and have gained some economic stability, their major goal is simply to survive. In contrast, immigrants will generally have come out of choice, after having made extensive preparations. Scarcella (1990) further explains that after the initial stage of culture shock, the families begin to recover from their frustration and fear. The pressure is still there, but they are beginning to gain control over problems, which previously seemed like major stumbling blocks. At this stage, school involvement can take place to a certain degree regardless of other barriers. Even though the degree of school involvement varies among ELL parents, the impeding factors of involvement can apply to all ELL or culturally diverse families as studies show. What should parents and teachers do to enhance the child's educational experience?

ENCOURAGING ELL PARENT INVOLVEMENT

There is an assumption that it is the parent that should be responsible for and willing to be involved in their child's education. If this is true then parents need to take the initiative to collaborate with their child's school. This, however, is not always the case for ELL parents with linguistic and cultural barriers. Scarcella (1990) suggests a few principles for encouraging ELL parent involvement. They are:

1. Getting to Know and Understand the Families

Considerable research shows that dramatic

improvements in parent involvement results when teachers understand and know the students and their families. It is important that those who teach ELL students have more than a superficial knowledge of the parents and families. They need to build a good relationship with them. Teachers need to have constant contacts with the parents through written communication in the native language of the family, do home visits with personnel trained to facilitate communication, participate in their social events, or use other means to build trust and respect.

2. Assessing the Needs of Families

There may be many assessment needs that schools should be aware of regarding ELL parents. Educators can ascertain these needs by learning about the parents' backgrounds, concerns and interests. Understanding these factors will help ensure that school provides relevant services, responses to widespread interests, and makes use of valuable resources parents can contribute to school.

3. Reducing Prejudice and Stereotypes

Unfortunately, communication breakdowns often give rise to prejudice. Prejudice can be a unified, stable, and consistent negative response toward members of a particular ethnic group. Educators need to recognize that prejudice will seldom go away without intervention. Therefore, there is a need to create school activities that foster cross-cultural understanding and acceptance.

4. Creating Cultural Awareness

It is useful to have written guidebooks available for staff covering relevant program policies and procedures and cultural issues related to ethnicities served. In addition, a district with significant ELL populations might think of having liaison staff for such groups. The flexibility and sensitivity of school staff to serving the needs of ELL families are very crucial factors of the parent involvement. Educators should be culturally competent with the population they serve.

5. Developing Community Support Systems

Non-English speaking families new to a community need community support mechanisms. It is helpful to find someone in the community to mentor the new families. By default, this may fall on the school's ELL teacher or the school family support worker who speaks the parents' native language. Initial support will involve basic living and survival tips. Community support involves being aware of the following: health services, shopping, basic living tips, migrant services, and translator services. School can reciprocate with other local agencies in regard to sharing translators and availability of other resources and allow the community to use school facilities for their social activities. Valdes (1996) defines some possible types of support programs for parents:

I. Providing Parental Support and Education

Schools should offer an orientation workshop at the beginning of the school year to give parents information on how to best to support their children educationally. At meetings, parents need to receive information that describes how the school functions, the curriculum used in the school, how to help children understand the school's discipline procedures, and what supportive early-learning activities may be available.

II. Supporting Parent-School Involvement

Parent involvement programs should emphasize the importance of parents helping children with homework, volunteering in school, and attending school functions. A key difference between parent education and parent involvement is that parent involvement is specifically meant to help children succeed academically, by becoming better at math and reading. Teachers should always invite these parents to become actively involved in the school as well as in their child's individual classroom activities.

III. Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum and instruction that reflects the culture, value, interest, experiences, and concerns of the immigrant family can enhance learning. When this occurs parents are better able to

understand the child's homework and will be more inclined to help their children. Schools should encourage parent involvement in curriculum design, at least at the building level. A key to involving parents is to trust them to help. This may sound simplistic, but it is too often the case that teachers or other school personnel decide that parents cannot help when they really can. A common misconception about non-English speaking parents is that they cannot help their children because they do not speak English. There are many ways that parents can help their children and also become more confident about helping their child. They can take the child to the library, go on parent-child field trips to interesting local sites, or talk to their children in their native language about ideas, concepts, and processes. It does not matter in what language they learn these things. Parents will eventually become empowered when they can reflect on the social realities of their community and involve themselves in their child's learning.

Working effectively with parents in the school setting is always a challenge. When the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of teachers and parents differ, the challenge becomes more complex. This should be considered a call to develop more effective methods and tools for including these parents in school activities. Teachers are busy people, and establishing positive relationships with second language parents is a win-win situation for both parents and teachers. It is definitely worth the time and effort it takes. When the effort is school-wide and supported by teachers, administrators and even outside agencies, there is an even greater possibility of success for the children of parents who have cultural and linguistic backgrounds that differ from the teacher's. When everyone works together understanding is increased and the school environment is more conducive to learning.

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