PROMOTING PARTNERSHIPS WITH MINORITY PARENTS: A REVOLUTION IN TODAY'S RESTRUCTURING EFFORTS

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Theoretical Framework

Promoting partnerships between schools and communities is one of the hottest topics on the nation's agenda (U.S. Department of Education, 1991: The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Wolfe, Howell, & Charland, 1989). The positive impact of such partnerships is well documented (Anderson, 1982; Elcholtz, 1984; Gargiulo & Graves, 1991; Purkey & Degen, 1985). Research specifically suggests that schools of the future must be redesigned with the assistance of the business sector and the community at large (USDE, 1991). As part of this restructuring effort, politicians and the private sector have initiated a crusade to "reinvent the American schools" (USDE, March 1992, p. 1). However, this restructuring effort will be effective only if it includes specific strategies to address the needs and promote the involvement of some of the most important players in the educational process--parents.

This article focuses on parental involvement and its role in the restructuring of the American school system and the problems Hispanic parents face when they interact with school personnel. It also describes current state, national, and private initiatives to promote successful partnerships between schools and minority parents. Status of Parent Training Programs

As a result of published findings of the National Commission on Education in 1983, A Nation at Risk, parental involvement became a key component of schools' restructuring efforts. For almost a decade, efforts have been made to increase the involvement of parents in the education process. These efforts have been partially successful with middle-class, European American parents, but they have failed to reach large numbers of ethnic and linguistic minorities (Gonzalez, 1992). Efforts to involve minorities have failed because "the educational system has not demonstrated the necessary flexibility to accept, integrate, and communicate the values shared by minority cultures" (Gonzalez, 1992, p. 2). This cultural discrepancy has excluded parents as well as students from meaningful participation in the education process. Hence, there is a need to identify appropriate ways to reach and involve parents and students from non-European cultural backgrounds (Gonzalez, 1992; Rosado & Aaron, 1991).

The School Culture
School culture plays an important role in promoting effective partnerships between schools and the community (Johnson, 1988; Wolfe et al., 1989). Wolfe et al. (1989) define this type of culture, as "the norms, values, and beliefs of those involved in the education process" (p. 29). Furthermore, they suggest that successful partnerships are intimately tied to the quality of the school culture and the sense of community developed among school participants, i.e., administrators, faculty, students, and parents (Wolfe et al., 1989). This sense of school community reduces alienation, increases cooperation among parents, and raises achievement among students (Purkey & Degen, 1985; Wolfe et al., 1989). To develop this sense of community, schools should promote district-wide reforms to make parents and students from all ethnic and socioeconomic groups feel they are a welcome component in the school community. Genuine partnerships between the school and community will not be possible unless schools make a conscious effort to understand and to modify the human dimension of school culture.

The curriculum is a key component of school culture. The curriculum in American schools focuses on the experiences of the European American society. This Eurocentric curriculum tends to stereotype and disqualify knowledge about ethnic and linguistic minorities (Aronowitz & Girox, 1985; Banks & Banks, 1989). This disfranchisement has promoted alienation and apathy among minority students and parents. Alienation and apathy in turn have jeopardized opportunities to form meaningful partnerships between schools and minority communities. As part of the restructuring effort of the school system, the curriculum should be updated to reflect the views and perspectives of ethnic minorities in the United States. This multiethnic approach will make the curriculum more meaningful and appealing to ethnic minorities and will minimize the discrepancy between the school culture and the culture of ethnic groups.

Hispanics in the United States

Hispanics are the second largest ethnic minority and the largest linguistic minority in the United States. This group is expected to experience the largest population growth for the next century (Armstrong, 1991). By the year 2000 the total Hispanic population will grow from the current level of 6.4% to 15% of the total U.S. population. At this rate of growth, Hispanics will become the largest ethnic minority in the United States and must become major players in the school restructuring effort.

Implications for the Future

The involvement of linguistic and ethnic minorities in the education process is paramount to a successful restructuring of the school system. Statistics show that by the next century a large number of the total U.S. population growth will come from minority groups (Armstrong, 1991; QEMP, 1990). And a large number of these minorities, 17.4 million, will be limited English proficient (LEP) adults (USDE, December 1991). Consequently, ethnic minorities and LEP adults will play an important role in implementing restructuring efforts. The success of these efforts will depend on the readiness and competence of those involved in the education process. Consequently, we must empower these minorities so they can contribute to the restructuring of the American school system.

Methods

Background to the Study

This research is a by-product of six training sessions conducted for Hispanic parents from a large inner-city school district in Southeast Texas. The training was sponsored by Title VII of the Elementary and
Secondary Education Act of 1965 (E.S.E.A.), a community-based social service center, and Texas Southern University. During the training, parents were exposed to information from three major areas: language, culture, and parental involvement.

Participants were exposed to the following topics: ethnicity and language, origin and nature of the Hispanic groups in the United States, socioeconomic and educational status of Hispanics at local and national levels, historical elements that have affected the development of the language and culture of Mexican Americans in the United States, and promoting linguistic and ethnic pride among Hispanic children. Culture: Learning modalities and how Hispanic children learn best: accomplishments of Hispanics (Mexican Americans) and their contributions to the American culture. Parental Involvement: The role of the school board and ways to influence their decisions: techniques to help students with school work and the organization of community efforts. (See Rosado & Aaron (1991) for additional details about the training).

**Subjects**

This study was limited to fifty (50) Hispanic parents and grandparents, between the ages of 20 to 68, who represented 43 families with children in bilingual/ESL programs. Seventy-six percent of the subjects were recent immigrants and described themselves as limited English proficient (LEP) or non English speakers (NES). The remaining 24% were born in the United States and identified themselves as Americans of Hispanic descent. Thirty-five out of fifty subjects answered the question related to socioeconomic status. All 35 subjects indicated that their children were receiving free or reduced meals in school, which indicates that the majority of the subjects were from low socioeconomic environments.

**Instruments**

Two instruments were used in this study: a bilingual, Spanish/English structured questionnaire and an impromptu nonstructured questionnaire. The bilingual questionnaire was designed to gather demographic information about the participants and information related to their participation in school related activities. In addition to questions requesting demographic information, the instrument contained twelve open-ended questions related to the following areas: (a) interaction with school personnel, (b) communication problems experienced by parents, and (c) familiarity with school routines and activities. The impromptu questionnaire was a nonstructured set of questions designed to expand on topics discussed during the presentations.

**Figure 1. Research Design.**

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<td>X = Treatment (instructional)</td>
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**Procedure**

The research design for this study is descriptive. Figure 1 presents a model of the research design.

Data for the study were gathered by means of group discussion, informal conversation, and a structured questionnaire given to each parent in attendance. The main focus of the data collection was to investigate the elements that have affected the participation of parents in school activities.
After each presentation participants were encouraged to ask questions and discuss the material presented. During these group discussions, the researcher or his assistant functioned as a nonparticipant recorder. They recorded verbatim comments from parents. Special attention was given to comments related to communication problems associated with language and cultural differences.

Participants who exhibited strong views about a given topic or who showed evidence of cultural or linguistic shock were interviewed using an impromptu questionnaire developed to obtain specific details about the comments presented during the group discussion.

Additionally, subjects were administered a bilingual, Spanish/English, structured questionnaire. This instrument was designed to gather demographic information about the participants and information related to their participation in school related activities.

**Analysis of the Data**

The demographic information was analyzed based on percentages. Data from both instruments were analyzed and organized under three main areas: (a) problems associated with culture and socioeconomic differences, (b) problems associated with linguistic differences, and (c) problems associated with educational achievement.

**Results**

The results of the study suggest that cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and educational differences affect the participation of Hispanic parents in the education process.

**Cultural and Socioeconomic Differences**

As a result of cultural and socioeconomic differences, Hispanic parents perceive teachers and principals as being distant and impersonal. The following excerpts from three participants represent samples of these perceptions.

What things will motivate you to visit the school more frequently?
"Si me hablaran mas los maestros." (If the teachers would speak to me more often.)

"Si me hicieran caso, y no se me tratara como un idiota." (If I were given more attention and not treated as an idiot.)

Have you been discriminated against by school officials?
"Si, solo con el hecho de que mis hijos asistan a la escuela pone a los maestros en un pedestal que no se alcanzan y tal parece que le hacen un favor" (Yes, by the fact that my children attend school, it places teachers on a pedestal impossible to reach, and they believe that they are doing my children a favor.)

These comments show a great deal of frustration and resentment toward school personnel and obvious communication problems between Hispanic parents and school personnel.

**Linguistic Differences**
Language differences and the educational background of parents have also affected parents' participation in the education of their children. The surveyed parents cited language and work-related problems as reasons for not being able to visit the schools more frequently. The language issue permeated the whole training program and was repeatedly addressed in the questionnaires. In the structured questionnaire, seventy-six percent of the subjects identified themselves as limited English proficient (LEP) or non-English speakers (NES). The large number of LEP and NES adults might explain the reasons for the numerous misunderstandings and cultural clashes between Hispanic parents and school personnel.

As a direct result of linguistic differences, some Hispanic parents perceive the use of English by the administrative staff and monolingual teachers in school as a discriminatory action against them. When parents were asked whether they have been discriminated against or subjected to any kind of unfair treatment, two parents mentioned the language issue as a discriminatory action against them: What type of discrimination have you experienced in school? "Porque no hablan espanol." (Because they (school personnel) do not speak Spanish.)

The Hispanic subjects also believed that the language issue has caused problems for their children in school. They believe that some of the tension among students from different linguistic backgrounds has been caused by the lack of recognition given to minority languages in public schools as this excerpt shows: "Si hablan espanol se pelean con mis hijos." (If they (Hispanics) speak Spanish they (non-Hispanics) fight them.)

Educational Background

"...Go back to school" and make this a "nation of students" (President George Bush as cited in USDE, 1991, p. 23).

The educational background of Hispanic parents has also discouraged their participation in school activities. An analysis of the data revealed that 57% of the parents in the study have never been to school or have fewer than five years of schooling; only 5% of them had some kind of technical career or college training. With this kind of background, it is difficult for this population to serve as successful role models and to perform their educational duties as parents. The subjects of this study represent an example of the target population addressed by President Bush in his speech to the America 2000 initiative when he challenged American adults to "go back to school" and make this nation, a "nation of students" (President George Bush as cited in USDE, 1991, p. 23). This challenge has been heard and accepted by Hispanics. Now, it is up to local educational leaders to facilitate the process by creating programs to address the needs of linguistic minorities.

Analysis and Discussion

The majority of the subjects in the present study described themselves as recent immigrants, coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds and lacking communication skills in English. Despite having children in bilingual programs, the parents felt that Spanish did not enjoy full recognition in English. Despite having children in bilingual programs, the parents felt that Spanish did not enjoy full recognition in English. These cultural and linguistic characteristics create a sense of distrust of school officials and make LEP parents feel powerless and unable to contribute to the education process.

The inconsistency between the patterns of behavior of school personnel and the behavior of Hispanic parents has created additional communication problems. Hispanic parents perceived school personnel as being distant and impersonal. This perception constitutes a deviation from the status teachers traditionally enjoy in Spanish-speaking countries. In Mexico and in most Latin American countries, teachers are...
traditionally perceived as authority figures, and their educational decisions are rarely questioned. However, once people from these countries come to the United States and are exposed to cultural and linguistic shock, they become distrustful of people and institutions. This lack of trust, together with a lack of experience with American culture, affects their ability to perceive school personnel as bonafide members of the education process.

The Hispanic cultural concept of "el respeto," respect, has also played an important role in the numerous miscommunication problems between school officials and parents. In this study, one of the parents reported what he called "falta de respeto," lack of respect, from school officials. This parent felt that he was treated and perceived as an idiot: "Si me hicieran caso, y no me tratara como un idiota."

For traditional Hispanics, respect is the foundation for any professional or social relationship. Once the respect is lost, it is virtually impossible to resume interaction.

Parents play a key role in the restructuring effort of the school system. One of their main functions should be to serve as "teachers of their children" (USDE, 1991, p. 26). Unfortunately, too many minority parents do not have the ideal educational background to become effective teachers of their children. Subjects in this study showed a genuine interest in the education of their children but lacked some of the tools required to help them. They have problems understanding mainstream culture and language. They have the willingness but lack the training; they have the interest but lack the expertise. Interest and motivation are important, but by themselves they are not sufficient to provide essential school support for their children. If the population of this study represents a microcosm of urban inner-city Hispanic parents, then the parental component of the school restructuring effort is in jeopardy unless a conscious effort is made to empower this population.

**Empowering Hispanic Parents**

As part of the proposed restructuring effort, a comprehensive training program must be organized to empower parents. Training needs for Hispanic parents vary among individuals. However, there are clear indications that this population, as well as 25 million other Americans, need training in basic literacy skills (USDE, 1991). In addition to basic literacy skills, Hispanic adults need instruction in English as a second language (ESL) and mainstream culture. Due to the large population involved and the complexity of training needs, federal and state institutions and the private sector should join efforts to empower parents to assume their role in restructuring efforts.

**Federal and State Initiatives**

The federal government has taken the lead in the attempt to meet the needs of adults in general. In 1991, the federal government enacted the National Literacy Act. The Act authorized $15,000,000 for each of the fiscal years 1992, 1993, 1994, and 1995 (Quigley, 1991). This legislation is designed to restructure programs for adult education nationwide and "to enhance the national effort to eliminate the problem of illiteracy" (H.R. 751, p. 2). The Act defined literacy as the "ability to read, write, and speak English, and to compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society" (H.R. 751, p. 1). The Act allocates funds for ESL programs by increasing from 10 to 15 percent of the state set-aside money for innovative demonstration projects and teacher training" (USDE, December 1991). The teacher training component of the Act places special emphasis on educators of adults with limited English proficiency (USDE, December 1991). State education agencies are currently restructuring adult education programs to comply with the mandates of the new law. In the near future, states should make funds available to promote ESL instruction and to fight illiteracy in general.
Private Initiatives

In the private sector, the America 2000 initiative represented by the New American Schools Development Corporation (ASDC) has taken the lead in the restructuring effort. The main goal of this organization is to sponsor the development of innovative designs and alternatives to reach the six National Education Goals of the American 2000 initiative. The fifth goal specifically calls for empowering parents to assist in the restructuring of public schools.

"Every Adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (USDE, 1991, p. 3).

The remaining five goals of the America 2000 initiative call for an overhaul of the school system. This task was initiated in the Fall of 1992 when the ASDC made a nationwide call for proposals to create new, "break-the-mold schools" (USDE, March 1992). The agency received 686 proposals from 49 states for the first phase of the design process (USDE, March 1992). In July 9, 1992, the ASDC announced the selection of 11 design teams throughout the United States (USDE, July 1992). The selected teams just completed Phase 1 of the restructuring effort, Search and Design. The Search and Design phase started in the summer of 1992 and ended in the summer of 1993. Following the first year's design work, about half of the grantees will receive two-year grants (summer 1993-spring 1995) to field test the instructional design. In Phase 3 of the process (spring 1995-spring 1997), additional funds will be made available to assist grantees and districts nationwide in the implementation of the model programs (USDE, July 1992).

The America 2000 movement and the National Literacy Act of 1991 are prime examples of the types of initiatives the government and the public sector should sponsor. Initiatives of this kind have the potential to provide the momentum needed for the restructuring of the schools on a larger scale. These efforts are promising; though underfunded and with unrealistic goals, they bring hope and reassurance that illiterate Americans, including LEP Hispanic parents, are not forgotten. These efforts bring hope that in the future ethnic minorities will have a better chance to compete and become effective partners in the education of their children.

Conclusions

The realities of the nineties call for a restructuring of American education to reflect demographic changes and new social and economic demands. There is no need to reinvent the schools, but there is a need to restructure them. Restructuring means more than adding new facilities and increasing technology; it means addressing the human dimension of school culture. This human dimension includes not only the cultural schema of school personnel but also the expectations and cultural backgrounds of students and parents. Educational reformers need to understand that when the knowledge and wisdom of ethnic minorities are valued in the school culture, ethnic minorities are in a better position and will be more willing to support their children and the educational program (Weinstein, 1992).

The success of restructuring efforts depends on a carefully planned partnership involving all components of the education process: schools, the business sector, and parents. Members of this partnership should be given the necessary training to empower them to carry out the restructuring task. Hispanic parents in this study show the need for training in basic literacy skills and in English as a second language. Parents and school personnel and perhaps those in the business sector need cross-cultural training. This cultural and linguistic training will make parents feel that they can be part of the decision making process and will
empower parents and school personnel to become productive reformers of the educational system and more effective contributors to the education of their children.

References


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