

Parental Involvement: Addressing the Educational Needs of Hispanic Inner-City Parents

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Parents, "As surely as you are your child's first and most influential teacher... You must be living examples of what you expect your children to honor and emulate. Moreover, you bear the responsibility to participate actively in your child's education" (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 35).

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The involvement of parents in the education of their children has a positive effect on the children's performance in school (Bermudez & Padron, 1990; Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Comer, 1986; Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988; Johnson, 1986). Research has been consistent in this finding, and public opinion, expressed through polls, supports the involvement of parents in the education of their children. For example, results of a recent Gallup Poll of "Public Attitudes Toward Public Schools" show that the public perceives the home environment as the most important and positive influence in the education of children. The influence of the school environment was also mentioned and was second to the home environment as the most important issue affecting our public school system (Elam & Gallup, 1989). Results of this poll suggest that education cannot be separated from the influence of the home environment and that parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children.

Past and Present Trends

Since the beginning of the American education system, parental involvement has played an important role in education (Crenin, 1977). This involvement has continued through the years, but in the last decade (1980), it has gained momentum. Following the report of The National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983, A Nation at Risk, parental involvement became a key issue in education. As a result of this publication, government and school officials initiated massive efforts to motivate parents to get involved in the educational process. This publicity promoted national efforts to initiate programs to promote parental involvement. Most of these programs were geared toward middle-class educated parents. In recent years, this trend has shifted (Chavkin, 1989), and universities and local education agencies have attempted to address the needs of minority parents. Some of these programs have been successful in identifying and meeting the needs of these parents.

Yale's Parent Program was one of the first organized attempts to address the needs of inner-city minority parents (Haynes, Comer & Hamilton-Lee, 1986). Haynes et al. (1986) conducted a study to determine the impact of this program which was implemented in an inner-city school system. The program involved a series of community-oriented activities with the purpose of providing a support mechanism for the children and improving the parents' ability to deal with schools. In addition to these activities, parents were also asked to contribute a maximum of 15 hours of voluntary work in the schools and were given the opportunity to be involved in the planning and decision-making process. As a

direct result of this program, the authors reported a positive correlation between parental involvement and the development of a positive learning environment for children. The authors concluded that parental involvement in low-income, inner-city school districts is desirable and is an effective way to enrich the learning climate.

Clark (1988) conducted two separate studies: one involved white and Hispanic elementary students, and another one involved black middle school students. In these studies, Clark sought to identify effective parental practices that promote academic achievement. As a result of these investigations, a comprehensive series of parental involvement practices was developed to address the needs and to enhance the educational performance of poor and minority students.

Dornbusch and Ritter (1988) studied the effects and levels of parental involvement at the high school level. They found that regardless of the parents' educational background, children of parents who attended school functions had better grades than children of parents who did not participate in these functions. Additionally, the researchers found a positive correlation between family structure and parental involvement. The highest rate of participation was shown by two-parent households, and the lowest rate of participation came from single-parent households and low-income families. Dornbusch and Ritter also found that minority parents feel uncomfortable at school and are hesitant to initiate contacts with teachers.

At the college level, the University of Houston-Clear Lake, in cooperation with local school districts, developed a parent training program for preservice and inservice teachers and parents from local school districts (Bermudez & Padron, 1988). In this program, students were exposed to the cultural and linguistic barriers that affect parental involvement for minority parents. Students were trained to identify these barriers and to minimize them. The training for the parents covered the following areas: (a) English as a Second Language Classes; (b) Parental Rights and Responsibilities in School; (c) Health Education, Motivation, and Drug Abuse; and (d) Child Development Issues.

The program was successful in changing the teachers' attitudes about the involvement of minority parents in school affairs. As a result of the parental component, parents reported that they acquired awareness about school policies and the instructional program. Parents also developed a more favorable attitude toward the school and indicated their interest in becoming more involved in school activities.

Needs of Hispanic Parents

Despite several efforts to address the needs of minority parents in general, programs designed to address the needs of Hispanic parents are still at the embryonic stage. Hispanic parents, as well as other minority parents, have a strong commitment to education (Chavkin & Williams, 1988), but they generally lack the training to become effective partners in the education of their children (Montalvo, 1984 as cited in Chavkin, 1989). As suggested by Chavkin (1989), Hispanics and other minorities have special needs in the area of parental involvement; they need to be exposed not only to successful techniques for parental involvement, but to the background needed to become effective contributors to the education of their children.

Meeting the Needs of Hispanic Parents

This article addresses the parental involvement issue by reporting on the topics covered during a Summer Training Institute for Hispanic parents residing in the Houston Independent School District (HISD). A parental involvement training program was initiated to promote Hispanic participation in the education of their children. The training, conducted as part of a Title VII bilingual/ESL teacher training program and sponsored by participating agencies with a Title VII ESEA grant and Texas Southern University, was directed to parents of minority students attending school in the Houston Independent School District. The training was conducted on three separate dates from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Saturday. The workshops were conducted mostly in Spanish, but the use of English was encouraged. Parents were exposed to four major areas: language, culture, self-identity, and parental involvement, which provided techniques to help students to succeed in school.

Training Session One

The first workshop was conducted at the site of the community-based non-profit organization in June, 1989. Thirty-five parents and six children attended the workshop. Day care services were arranged for the children. The purpose of this session was to analyze three main questions: (a) Who are the Hispanics? (b) Where do they come from? (c) What is their socio-economic and educational status, and how can they improve it as a group?

In the morning session, historical background and demographics about Hispanics were presented. The purpose of the morning session was to make Hispanics aware of their power as a group and to motivate them to remain united in their struggle for progress and equality.

During the afternoon session, two topics were discussed: (a) How Hispanic Children Learn Best, and (b) The Role of the School Board and How It Works. Learning modalities were discussed, and strategies were given to help parents identify these modalities in their children. Suggestions were offered as to what kind of activities were appropriate for the different types of learners. A Hispanic school board trustee and resident of the area explained the roles, rules, and functions of the school board. Emphasis was placed on how parents can contact board members and influence the decision-making process for the benefit of their children.

Training Session Two

The second part of the training was conducted at the same location in July, 1989. Forty-five parents and 35 children attended this session. Day care facilities were again provided for the children. This session dealt with four areas: language and culture, accomplishments of Mexican-Americans, techniques to help students in school, and the organization of community efforts. In the area of language and culture, presenters analyzed the elements that have affected the language and culture of Hispanics in the area. Parents were encouraged to nurture their linguistic and ethnic pride and to transmit this pride to their children. During the afternoon session, presenters suggested and modeled techniques to help students in school. The last part of the day was devoted to discussion of the importance of community efforts and the steps to organize these efforts.

Training Session Three

The last part of the training was conducted in July, 1989. Twenty-five parents and 12 children attended this session. The morning session addressed the following issues: the educational and psychological implications of the development process of Hispanics and the issue of drug use among Hispanic youth. Both of these topics were included at the requests of the parents. The topics dealing with the implications of the developmental process and drug use were presented with the ultimate purpose of fostering communication and

understanding between the parents and their children. Tips for early detection of drug users were discussed. The role and services of the Department of Guidance and Counseling in the local school district were described. Follow-through procedures to deal with drug users were explained; telephone numbers and contact persons in the district were also provided.

The afternoon session dealt with one of the most important issues in parental involvement: the educational aspirations and the academic background of Hispanic parents. To address this issue, a panel composed of personnel from local technical schools, community colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations was invited to motivate parents to improve their academic background. Panelists presented a general view of the different educational opportunities and programs available to the public. Brochures and applications were given to the parents. As a result of this activity, at least four parents initiated the procedure for enrollment in a Title VII vocational training program and in a high school equivalency program.

Summary

The aforementioned training constituted an attempt to generate capacity building among Hispanic parents. This program represents a small portion of the total effort required to address the needs of Hispanic inner-city parents. The training was successfully completed, and its main goals were achieved. The total impact of this program is still to be seen.

Training of this nature should be established and offered on a yearly basis. In addition to the topics covered in this training, English as a second language instruction for limited-English-speaking parents should also be included. This kind of training can contribute to the building of competence and self-reliance among minorities, and I hope it will motivate them to assume their roles as partners in the education of their children.

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