

The Journal of Educational Issue of Language Minority Students, V. 16, Summer 1996. Boise State University.

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## Parents as Resources in Schools: A Community-of-Learners Perspective

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*This work was partially funded by a grant from the Metropolitan Life Foundation under the College-School Partners Program.*

Parent involvement is touted as an important ingredient in education reform programs aimed at improving educational and social outcomes for children. Yet such involvement encompasses a wide variety of activities and goals, making it difficult to substantiate the claim that parent involvement programs contribute to the educational success of children (White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992). Particularly for low income and minority families, involving parents has been narrowly viewed as a way to help them develop a knowledge base or set of skills to assist with their children's academic and social success in school (Comer, 1984, 1988). A review of the literature shows that parents are most often used as "supplemental intervenors" for their children (White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992, p. 118), with parent education activities designed to train parents to be supplemental teachers at home.

Implicit in the "parents as intervenors" model is the assumption that parents are not doing what they are supposed to in order to help schools educate students (Chapman, 1991; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990, 1991; Solomon, 1991). Regrettably, the sociocultural contexts in which parent education activities are presented are often overlooked (Heath, 1983; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992), as is the view of parents as knowers or as resources in the schools and communities. Davies (1991) asserts that "a new definition of parent involvement is needed that is not limited to traditional parent activities in the school building. In addition, families must be viewed not as deficient, but as sources of strength" (p. 379).

In what follows, we present work from a pilot parent-involvement effort aimed at building a community of learners that involved parents as teachers and learners. We draw on Vélez-Ibáñez' (1988) and Moll's (1992) formulations of how socially constructed "funds of knowledge" can be used to mediate thinking and highlight how the skills and knowledge that parents possess can provide a rich foundation for involving them in educational change and improvement. Funds of knowledge are defined as "the essential cultural practices, bodies of knowledge, and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive" (Moll, 1992, p. 21). From a community-of-learners perspective, these funds of knowledge represent a potential social and intellectual resource for schools and the community. Through the creation and encouragement of social support networks, schools can be invaluable partners in helping parents see their skills and experiences as assets. Moreover, parental funds of knowledge can be used to teach others valuable skills, practices, and ways to access community resources.

This view of parent involvement, then, begins with the parents' articulation of their needs and wants, followed by an assessment of personal and community resources to meet expressed needs. The role of teachers and the educational system shifts away from formulating the nature and goals of parent education activities to a supportive role in assisting parents in the acquisition and development of resources parents deem valuable. Ultimately, this form of parent involvement helps parents develop educational, social, economic, and political interactions within the school and the broader community. We will discuss the application of this view of parent involvement at a middle school and its potential for helping parents be much more than just "school friendly" and "school useful."

## Method

### *Setting and participants*

The *Instituto Familiar* was funded by the Metropolitan Life Foundation under the College-School Partners Program. It was established at Carr Middle School, located in a large school district in southern California, as a way to foster the development and psychosocial well-being of economically marginalized Latino families.

Latino students at Carr make up approximately 85% of the student population. The Latino population is primarily low-income, working families, with approximately 40% recent arrivals from both rural and urban areas in Mexico or Central America. Although the Latino parents within this population are primarily limited-English and Spanish dominant speakers, most of the children speak English, and some are bilingual English-Spanish speakers.

Present in this community are the usual array of economic and social problems that typify large metropolitan areas: a high dropout rate, alcohol and drug abuse, high unemployment, and youth gangs. These families are also challenged by their own unique cultural and economic realities. Because of their limited English literacy and formal education, many of these parents feel socially isolated and culturally lost within the school. Feelings of isolation are further accentuated by intergenerational conflicts that arise when children more readily assimilate into the dominant culture. It is not uncommon for children of immigrant parents to adhere to a set of cultural norms and values that are different from those of their parents (Alva, 1991).

### **A Community-of-Learners Perspective: "Instituto Familiar"**

#### *The study/procedure*

This initiative approached parent education from a grassroots, community-of-learners perspective. This perspective recognizes and affirms the histories, talents, and dispositions of parents. From a community-of-learners perspective, parent education programs provide support for helping parents cross the divide between teacher and learner, so in the best circumstances, parents have the opportunity to be both. This perspective on parent education also cultivates the talents and experiences of parents, rather than denigrating those experiences. In contrast, prior to the inception of the *Instituto Familiar*, the parent component at Carr School was directed by a school support person whose function was to organize the parent involvement efforts. She typically organized workshops offered by outside experts who spoke on a variety of topics (e.g., drug abuse, dropout prevention, teenage sexuality) which school personnel felt parents should know more about. The parents had minimal voice in setting the agenda and goals of the parent education component.

A community-of-learners perspective was put into practice in the form of an *instituto*, a common way of obtaining further education and training in Mexico. In addition, successful ideas begin most often among small groups whose members feel comfortable with one another. Because of these cultural traditions, we began with a series of informal gatherings in which a few of the parents came together to voice their needs, wants, and views of community resources and possible solutions to perceived problems. This grassroots approach of involving parents served to build a sense of ownership in the *Instituto*. Eventually, a small, self-selected group of parents took on the leadership role of administering and planning the *Instituto's* activities and modules.

### *Research framework and data collection*

The research framework of holistic ethnography used in this study seeks to "describe all or part of a culture or community by describing beliefs and practices of the group studied...through carefully observing social organization, family structure and political relationships..." (Jacob, 1987, p. 13). The holistic ethnographer further seeks to describe general themes and patterns in the culture or community, how various parts of the culture or community are interdependent, and how change in one part of the community results in change in other areas. Data were collected through ethnographic observations, one-on-one interviews with parents, follow-up focus interviews, and recorded comments from the parent advisory meetings. Fieldnotes were also taken at all site visits.

The researchers developed a parent survey to assess community needs, wants, and resources (see Appendix A). It included questions about family values, skills, and abilities, the school as a resource, and the use of community services and agencies. This instrument was administered to parents in the first wave of modules. Surveys were conducted orally and individually. By asking parents to express their views, they had the opportunity to reflect on, to voice, and to awaken a consciousness about their particular issues and concerns.

The assessment of parents' knowledge, talents, and experiences began with an invitation to parents to reflect upon what it means to be "well educated" and to think about ways in which the school and the educational system can be used for their own gains and development. Through structured interviews, the parents came to appreciate that each of them had specific skills and talents that could be shared with others. Moreover, the structured interviews were useful in helping the parents identify specific skills that they were interested in learning or developing further.

### *Data analysis*

We borrowed from Nettles' (1989, 1991) and Delgado-Gaitan's (1990) work to frame our data analysis and documentation of the growth and change observed in the parents at Carr School. Their framework for conceptualizing community involvement includes three change processes: (a) mobilization, (b) instruction, and (c) allocation of resources. *Mobilization* refers to actions that bring about or increase parent involvement. *Instruction* refers to actions designed to improve the personal and intellectual development of parents or those designed to help parents learn more about the rules and values that govern the social relationships they have with other community members. These social relationships can involve a range of community actors. Social relationships can involve the parent-child relationship or even their interactions within medical, educational, and social services institutions. Finally, *allocation of resources* includes any activities or organizational structures that provide resources to parents and families, often increasing access to resources by removing existing barriers.

### *Mobilization*

Mobilization involves creating a level of awareness and a climate so parents are assured of having a format to voice their needs and wants. We did not opt for the more usual top-down model of parent involvement in which the school invites parents to participate in school-established programs. At Carr School, parents were guided to recognize and express their own skills and talents, as well as to articulate their needs. Over time, the parents also became involved in shaping school plans and decisions.

Initially, we reached the parents through a parent advisory board. The advisory board consisted of eight self-selected parents who regularly attended the school's parent meetings and who were interested in giving shape to the *Instituto Familiar*. The advisory board convened biweekly in the initial months and, through informal conversations, they identified areas of interest and concern among parents. The advisory board was also instrumental in resolving several issues that arose as the direction and structure of the *Instituto* were being formulated. Some of these early issues are discussed below.

At the initial session the idea of offering workshops or modules based on the parents' wants and needs was presented. One parent suggested offering sessions on gang and drug abuse prevention. Another parent responded, "Ya nos han dado mucho de eso en el PTO. Lo que necesitamos es algo para nosotros." (They've already given us a lot of that as part of the Parent -Teacher Organization. What we want is something for ourselves.) This was the advisory board's first expression of self-determination.

In conceptualizing the *Instituto*, its location had to be resolved. Should the instruction modules be held at the school? Would parents be more likely to attend if the modules were given at a local community center that was conveniently located? One parent responded with vigor that she wanted the classes to be held at school even though the community center might be more readily accessible because it is a safe haven and, more importantly, because "Queremos que nuestros hijos vean que nosotros también vamos a la escuela para aprender." (We want our children to see that we go to school to learn, too.)

Another issue raised by a member on the advisory board was whether the modules should be open only to Carr School parents. Through discussion, the board decided that the classes should be open to community members who showed a desire to learn and to improve their skills or knowledge. As one parent commented, "La educación es para todos, no solo los padres. Estas clases pueden servir para el mejoramiento de toda la comunidad." (Education is for everyone, not just parents. These classes can serve to improve the community.)

Publicity was another issue that was addressed. The advisory board felt the modules should be advertised in local shops and on local Spanish-language radio stations as public service announcements. The parents took on the responsibility of designing fliers, posting them in local establishments, and calling radio stations to place public service announcements. Additionally, the teachers sent home fliers with every student to inform parents about the instructional modules.

As another example of the mobilization of parents, the *Instituto Familiar* modules were originally held at the school, which limited the hours of instruction. In response to requests, the *Instituto* was moved to a community center to offer evening and Saturday classes. The parents have now determined that renting space at the community center is an expense that can be eliminated by holding classes in a parent's garage. As mobilization implies, they have come to realize that collectively they have a great many useful talents that they can teach each other. They are learning how to organize themselves and the resources in their environment so as to capitalize on their skills and talents.

## *Instruction*

The literature on parent involvement reflects a desire on the part of educators to involve parents in activities that support the school's educational agenda for students. Consequently, this top-down approach skips over what parents might contribute based on their own experiences and knowledge. Parents with little formal education who are economically marginalized typically do not give themselves credit for what they know, especially if it falls outside of the realm of what the school traditionally values and considers important.

Through the *Instituto Familiar*, we sought to develop a "community of learners" within a sociocultural context that was familiar to the participants. Moll (1992) and Vélez-Ibáñez (1988) have carefully described networks of exchange that are found within communities in which members share or exchange skills, information, and talents, or what Moll and Vélez -Ibáñez termed funds of knowledge. Networks of exchange are informal *quid pro quo* systems that provide families social support and a means by which to survive economically through the exchange of services without necessarily involving an exchange of money (Greenberg, 1989). These networks are most especially used among kin relationships, among clustered households, and may revolve around child care, home remedies, and the repair of home appliances and cars.

Through the parent survey, we invited parents to articulate existing funds of knowledge in their household and in those of their relatives and friends. We asked the parents to include skills and talents they have developed or enhanced through formal training or practical experience. Thus, the *Instituto Familiar* capitalized on and expanded culturally familiar structures and informal networks of exchange to include formal arrangements "to teach and show others how." Beginning with the participants' knowledge and experiences, they created a climate in which teaching and learning could occur without prescribing the content. The *Instituto* also set a tone that valued the skills and abilities of parents and encouraged parents to teach them to their children. Indeed, the vast majority (80%) said they were willing to participate in teaching others what they knew.

Among this group of Carr School parents, the following funds of knowledge were identified: auto mechanics, cooking, home repair and construction, literacy skills, sewing, and tile laying. The parents also expressed the desire to learn several specific marketable skills: fixing electrical appliances, home repairs, cosmetology, how to make and modify clothing, and computer skills. The survey revealed that most of the parents knew the community college was within five miles of this neighborhood and that it provides the type of classes they were interested in taking. However, many parents and adults of this community perceive the community college to be inaccessible. The fees are expensive, and the courses are offered only in English. In short, by asking the parents to articulate what skills and experiences they were willing to share with others, we created a climate in which parents themselves could become resources for each other. Doing so validates and legitimizes their funds of knowledge and social networks of exchange.

To date, nine modules have been offered. Attendance for all nine modules has been at nearly 100% of the first cohort. Classes have been offered in beauty instruction, child care, computers, electrical repairs, guitar playing, plumbing, and sewing. With one exception, they have been taught by parents. The exception was a community college instructor whom we invited to team-teach with a parent. Paired teaching had been an original intent of the *Instituto Familiar* to help parent-instructors learn how to organize course content and other aspects of teaching such as the effectiveness of using a hands-on approach. This particular team-teaching effort proved to be extremely effective.

To further illustrate how the community-based funds of knowledge can be used in parent education programs the following anecdotes are presented.

At one of the initial board meetings, several parents requested that a module on learning to play the guitar be offered for the students and parents. A marginally involved mother stepped forward as an accomplished guitar player to teach the module. The guitar module also provided the opportunity for parents and their children to come together to share a common learning experience. The initiation of a guitar module also provided impetus for the school district to pull out of storage several unused guitars. The two-month-long Friday afternoon module grew from four to fifteen students plus an occasional parent by the end of the school year.

Yolanda had been a frequent presence at various school functions, but she was marginally involved. Our survey revealed that she had beauty school training that she was delighted to share with others. She subsequently became a link between the parents and the university researchers and became so involved in the educational process that she sought and gained admission for her son to a post-secondary institution.

Eusebio had been a teacher of electronics at a technical institute in Mexico, but upon arrival in the United States was only able to find restaurant work. He, too, became a link between the community and the researchers as well as a valued home appliance repairs teacher. As the researchers eagerly pushed forward in preparing for the first modules, he informed us, "Me parece que están haciendo esto a relámpago. Conozco a mi gente. Todos van a necesitar más tiempo para reconocer lo bueno de éste trabajo en la comunidad." (I think you're trying to do this too fast. I know my people, and it will take some time for people to recognize the value of this work in the community.) He encouraged us to take our time in developing the concept and drawing out parent/community participation. His words proved prophetic. The first module on home repair and improvement drew 10 participants. The second offering drew 22 participants.

As a final illustration of the extent of growth experienced by this group of parents, they recently organized and held a farewell party for the school district's superintendent. He had been supportive of the *Instituto* and the advisory board's efforts. Indeed, several school teachers and administrators directly credited the parents' involvement with the *Instituto* in facilitating their organization of this event.

### *Allocation of resources*

Allocation of resources refers to activities that provide access to resources by removing existing barriers. The *Instituto Familiar* has been funded through a private grant; however, the goal for the *Instituto* is to seek long-term institutionalized funding to ensure that parents will have continued access to financial support, as well as the essential people and settings within the school.

Evidence of long-term changes in the allocation of resources has manifested itself in a variety of ways. As initial funding for the *Instituto Familiar* is running out, the parents have written letters to the funding agency requesting continuation; many stated how much they benefited from these classes. These same parents have limited literacy skills in English and are not accustomed to making formal requests for resources and services.

The physical map and organization chart of a school are two good indicators of the seriousness of the parent education component in that school. A strong parent education program will not be housed in a "spare room." At Carr School, the parents have a classroom that is the hub for many of their activities. It has a bulletin board with announcements, photographs, and displays chronicling their events and accomplishments, a phone, and a coffee pot. Parents also know that they can reserve other rooms at the school and at the local community center for special functions and activities. In short, they have learned to

make full use of the various facilities and services available to them.

A community of learners should include a partnership between the school and parents. Strong parent education components should have a school coordinator who serves as a liaison to the parents and a planning committee or advisory board to provide oversight and direction. Special efforts are required also to bridge the gaps created by language, administration structures, and patterns of social interaction. Carr school has a liaison and an advisory board, and the school seeks ways to strengthen this developing partnership by further using parents' social and intellectual resources.

The implications mean taking a broader view of the role of parents in the education process that may well extend beyond curricular changes in the classroom. We found evidence that the parents had developed a larger view of the role of education and were more supportive of their children's need to stay in school. At another level of school involvement, parents reported feeling more comfortable in the school and participating in school-sponsored events and that they had a voice and a place at school. This parent involvement effort opened the school doors to parents, and they became comfortable in their children's learning environment. This involvement in school is particularly important for immigrant parents because it provides a way to close the cultural and linguistic gap that commonly exists, especially as adolescents become increasingly absorbed into the cultural norms and expectations of the dominant society.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

As schools seek to forge new and innovative ways of working with the community, we offer the following suggestions based on our work:

1. Recognize and assess the strengths and resources in the community by surveying funds of knowledge.
2. Develop strategies that address and respect the needs of parents.
3. Create a physical location and psychological space for parents to come together to voice their needs, wants, and concerns.
4. Designate school personnel and parents to follow up on recommendations and suggestions.
5. Engage parents and community members in the teaching process.
6. Provide support for adults who are first time parent-instructors.
7. Allow adequate time for the parent group to form an identity and purpose.

The home-school relationship has often meant developing parents as supplemental intervenors for their children's educational success. Through use of community-of-learners perspective, a parent involvement initiative was developed. *The Instituto Familiar* seeks to involve parents as both teachers and learners in the educational process. The skills, talents, and knowledge of the parents provided a foundation for conceptualizing the topics and direction of instruction. Moreover, the *Instituto Familiar* provided an informal and culturally familiar format within which to capitalize on the talents and abilities of parents and community members. Consequently, the role of school personnel shifted away from formulating the agenda of parent education efforts to working in partnership with parents in acquiring skills and resources they deem valuable. Growth and development within the community were evident through changes in the

mobilization, instruction, and allocation of resources, thus creating a more balanced school-community partnership. The partnership affirmed the parents and increased their involvement in the school and community.

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**APPENDIX A**

Metropolitan Life Grant Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Sex: F \_\_\_\_ M \_\_\_\_

How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you? Single \_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_ Separated \_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_ Widowed \_\_\_\_

Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you lived in the United States? \_\_\_\_\_

How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Name(s) and grade level of children at Carr Intermediate School?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What language(s) do you speak? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ I speak only Spanish.

\_\_\_ I speak Spanish much better than English.

\_\_\_ I speak Spanish somewhat better than English.

\_\_\_ I speak both English and Spanish well.

\_\_\_ I speak English somewhat better than Spanish.

\_\_\_ I speak English much better than Spanish.

\_\_\_ I speak only English.

EDUCATION AND WORK EXPERIENCE

A. Are you currently employed? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_

If employed, what is your job title and what skills do you use on the job?

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B. What is the highest grade you completed in school? \_\_\_\_\_

C. What was your educational goal?

If you did not reach your goal, what obstacles stood in your way?

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D. What type of career do you want for your child who attends Carr?

Explain why?

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E. What skills will he/she need to reach this goal?

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F. How many years of schooling will that career require?

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PARENTAL VALUES

A. As your children grow up, what three things worry you the most?

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B. What are important values or skills parents should teach their children?

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C. In what ways is raising an adolescent different from raising a young child?

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D. In what ways do family values change as a result of living in the United States?

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E. What kinds of changes do families make in adjusting to the American culture?  
How have these changes affected your family?

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SKILLS

A. When you think about your skills, what three things do you think you do best?

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B. Which of all your skills are good enough that other people would hire you to do them?

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C. What three skills would you most like to learn?

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D. Are there skills you would like to teach?

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SOCIAL SUPPORT

A. Whose opinions and ideas do you trust and value? Explain.

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B. When you need advice about raising your children, who in the community do you talk to?

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Is there anyone else? \_\_\_\_\_

SCHOOL AS A RESOURCE

A. What activities do you participate in at school? Why?

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B. What type of services should schools be providing families?

(Probe for both parent and student services.)

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C. What do you see as the biggest obstacles for providing these services?

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COMMUNITY AS A RESOURCE

A. What type of services are needed in the neighborhood?

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B. In the past six months, have you received support or advice from any of the following community agencies? (Read the list of community services.)

Preschool and Early Childhood Education

Elementary School

Higher Education

Adult Literacy

Counseling and Mental Health Organizations

Church and Religious Institutions

Nutrition Programs

Crisis Intervention Services

Health Departments

Hospitals and Health Clinics

Dental

Telephone Help Lines

Emergency Assistance Programs (e.g., shelters)

Utility, Transportation

Small Business and Commercial

Services

Housing

Child Protective Services

Juvenile Justice/Probation

Community Youth Programs

Legal and Immigration Services

Employment and Job Training Services

Drug and Alcohol Abuse Services

Police, Fire, and Other Safety Personnel

Recreation Programs and Facilities

Family Planning Services

C. What community services are underutilized by members of the community?

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D. What is the biggest obstacle families face in obtaining social services?

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Are there others?

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