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# Culture, Literacy, and Power In Family–Community–School–Relationships

*For too long, educators have held diminishing beliefs about Latino students' home life. Such beliefs are irrelevant except for the fact that students do not leave their culture at home; rather, home life is closely intertwined with their learning. Language and culture play a major role in students' learning and parents figure prominently in their children's academic success. In Latino communities, parents often feel disempowered because of their limited English language skills and their limited knowledge of the educational system. This inequality prevents Latino parents from advocating for their children in schools. However, balanced power relations between schools and Latino families are possible. The Carpintería research study reveals the transformation that is possible for parents and students when the family's language, culture,*

*and literacy are acknowledged, appreciated, and utilized to empower students, families, schools, and communities.*

**C**ONTRARY TO PUBLIC OPINION, parents who speak a language other than English participate actively in their children's education. A personal flashback conjures up memories about the significance of my own parent's involvement. Although my mother did not speak English very well, her language was high-expectation kindness. Her actions spoke volumes. She never missed a parent–teacher conference. She showed up in my classroom on occasional Fridays with arms full of chocolate cupcakes. She became a room mother and helped the teachers at every class gathering. Everyone loved my mother, Maria. Her visits to the classroom were important to my feeling of belonging. At home, when I was not doing chores, I could be found propped against our bedroom wall reading a book. My

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mother always insisted that my sisters and I read instead of watching television. Throughout our early years, Mom held high expectations for us to succeed in school and eventually choose a career.

Flash forward to current research on parent involvement: Researchers now know that parent involvement is imperative in children's education. Relationships between families, schools, and communities matter significantly. When parents engage in their children's schooling experiences, student achievement improves. There is evidence linking parent involvement and student academic gains. In a 15-school district case study, the National School Boards Association found that where parent-school partnerships existed, student achievement improved (Saks, 2000). Additional research findings indicate that family involvement in schools strengthens student achievement (Chadwick, 2004; Epstein et al., 2002; Henson & Berla, 1994). At the heart of the family-school partnerships is a power relationship determined by knowledge about the educational system that families have and vice versa—what schools know about families.

Knowledge is power, and power is negotiable. The knowledge of what and how parents need to negotiate with the school to advocate for their children is often culturally bound. How schools operate comprises a type of literacy that parents need to understand to successfully participate in their children's schooling. How power is distributed between the school and family unit affects students' adjustment and academic achievement. Families and schools have been engaged in power sharing and power struggles since the inception of public schools.

Through my family-school-community research, I have had the privilege of working with Latino, Hmong, Russian refugee, South East Asian, and Alaskan Native communities that live as neighbors with mainstream Anglo groups. This article is limited to the discussion of family school and community research as it pertains to Latinos. After 25 years working in numerous communities while researching parent-family-community interactions, I have recognized a pattern of building cultural capital via parent participation that reflects three levels of structural

and cultural relationships between parents and educators. I have identified three major types of power-sharing relations between families and schools: (a) conventional, (b) culturally responsive family-school-community connections, and (c) empowerment.

Three major principles connect immigrant families and their host communities around language, culture, literacy, and parent-school-community connections:

- How people communicate with each other, the types and forms of texts used to communicate, the information exchanged, and the language they use to communicate all constitute literacy in schools and home settings;
- Both families and schools utilize particular language and literacy to support their cultural milieu; and
- In Latino households, literacy extends beyond written texts; it involves the competent use of innate power in socially constructed contexts.

People's ability to participate actively in school and community activities expands the development of one's cultural knowledge. In a collective process, the learning of language and literacy is malleable, ever shifting, and in perpetual motion. Learning the language of the school is an empowering process for families; when this occurs, schools also win because they are in a position to build and maintain a strong communication system with families (Delgado Gaitan, 1990, 1994, 2001).

### **Conventional**

Schools exclude parents from participating actively for a myriad of reasons and in a variety of ways (Allen, 2007; Delgado Gaitan, 2004). Historically, public schools have recognized citizenship building and the Americanization of Latino students as an educational goal. The process succeeded, primarily through isolation of students through Americanization programs that focus on changing the students' language, dress, recreational activities, family traditions,

and home lifestyle (Gonzalez, 1990). For many years, community efforts have been a critical force in changing national policies on how Latino students are educated, altering the parents' role in the process.

Some schools include parents in educational activities minimally, taking what I term a *conventional parent involvement* stance. Most educators agree that the parents' most important responsibilities are to clothe, feed, bath, talk to, and provide necessities for their children. Along with supplying for their children's physical needs, teachers expect parents to support children in their homework and ensure that they acquire primary literacy skills before entering school. Educators believe that parents need to engage actively with the school and not relinquish their parenting responsibilities to the school.

Conventional parent involvement strategies include organizing back-to-school nights when parents visit their children's classroom, organized parent-teacher conferences at school, and annual Parent-Teacher-Student group fundraising activities designed to help meet student needs that school budgets cannot afford to cover. Schools notify parents about these events through memos and expect parents to know how to communicate with educators. Schools that involve parents conventionally are quick to note that mandatory events like back-to-school nights tend to be the best conventional ways to establish relationships with parents, if parents attend. Some teachers build communication by sending home weekly letters or individual notes on each student; these often include negative reports of student behavior. These means of communication serve little purpose for parents who are illiterate or do not have phones. If parents cannot attend back-to-school nights or parent-teacher conferences, they are often perceived as disinterested in or careless about their children's schooling. Schools believe that parents do not work with their children on school-related activities due to parents' lack of parenting skills and/or time to spend with their children. One teacher in Carpintería expressed her frustration when she perceived that parents shrugged their responsibilities, "Some students come to school hungry, dirty, and ill. They come

from places that cannot be defined as homes and they arrive at school unprepared to learn or behave properly" (Ms. Green, Personal communication, September, 13, 2000).

These minimal approaches to involving parents in their children's schooling belong to an educational process that caters mostly to mainstream groups. There is a need for more creative methods for communicating with parents of linguistically different students. When bilingual-bicultural education programs unfolded in the United States, the quality of conventional practices to foster Latino parental involvement improved. Although many current bilingual teachers agree that holding parent-teacher conferences and doing back-to-school nights are the most successful efforts to communicate with parents, they also know that these activities alone are insufficient in maximizing student achievement through parent involvement.

Language and culture are central to changing power relations between families and schools. Children's knowledge stems from the language they speak. Parents play critical roles in shaping their children's cultural environment through language and literacy in their home and community. Before even stepping foot in a school, students have learned the language and culture of their family, community, and social network. Within these settings they learn attitudes, norms, practices, beliefs, experiences, and aspirations. Although some Latino parents have had opportunities to participate in the larger mainstream culture, others have experienced exclusion because of their social history, their ethnic differences, and their socioeconomic status in the community. It could be said that parents' knowledge about schools and how they operate is a type of literacy.

Limited literacy about the educational system precludes parents' participation in their children's schooling (Decker & Decker, 2003; Delgado Gaitan, 2001; Lareau, 2000). In communities where parents have been isolated from schools because they are limited in English or have insufficient understanding of the operations within educational settings, parents need more opportunities to develop communication with educators. That communication process requires learning the lan-

guage of schooling, a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986).

How the language of schooling is learned can vary widely. Parents can learn to communicate with educators individually; however, that is a time-intensive process requiring effort from both parties. Another avenue involves a collective process, where schools reach out to parents to create structures that assist them in learning about the educational system together, encouraging them to participate. A third strategy originates in the community outside the school; parents organize community groups to support each other in learning how to advocate for their families in schools through various health and social institutions where they reside. All of these forms of engaging parents in the process of schooling are valuable. Every community must assess its specific needs and decide on the best approach for involving linguistically and culturally diverse families.

Dislocation impairs familiar systems that, in the place of origin, usually hold the person, family, and community together. Dislocation is traumatic for families who, forced into poverty, attempt to cross the border under the threat of violence and harm. In the Latino diaspora, social and institutional arrangements that ordinarily anchor human lives tend to breakdown. When these families enter the United States, unequal power relationships get established. These power relationships are a product of historically structured interactions between dominant and subordinate nation-states where those in control influence the social, political, and economic institutions at all levels from the national to the community and the family. Religion, social networks, and, most of all, family act as buffers to the distress that these people face in dislocation. Latino families have shown their resilience long before they begin to interact with schools in their new host communities. Being part of the Mexican, Central, and Latin American diaspora, they have demonstrated immense strength. These immigrants share a common history and culture.

Teachers' knowledge of the students' home culture is imperative, not as a relic to hang on the bulletin board, but as a means to provide a rich curriculum that allows students to express

themselves and participate fully in their learning. Becoming familiar with students' cultural backgrounds not only helps educators know who the students are, but it also makes them aware of the skills their students have that contribute to their learning. This knowledge of other cultures and the understanding of the ways in which children learn outside school enrich educators' ability to incorporate culturally different approaches in the instructional setting. Central to this matter is a mainstream community that needs to create a learning environment that supports variance and change. That is, immigrants learning a new culture represent only part of the equation. The Euro-American community in power also needs to change in its interactions with immigrants.

### **Culturally Responsive Parent–School–Community Connections**

Classroom culture is built on efficient family–school–community connections. Effective home–school communication facilitates educators' work. If parents work closely with teachers, they will learn the classroom and school's expectations, and the students will know that the home and school are working together consistently. Life in the classroom involves the language of instruction and a culture that is different from what students bring to school. Language and culture are not something that students carry in their backpacks. It is internal and is demonstrated in the ways students speak to their peers and to the teacher; it is how the teacher asks questions of the students. Just as they do in their homes, students act out classroom cultural norms, depending on their interpretation of the rules.

Both the home and school can share the power that schools alone typically hold when family and school cultures are incongruent. This is possible when educators design strategies to involve parents in ways that give them more of a voice. Continuity between educators and students does not just presume that students should change their culture to meet the educators' expectations. Educators also have a responsibility to understand their role in building the school culture

and learning environment. Rather than trying to change poor or ethnically different families into the mainstream culture, educators should attempt to create a common culture with families—a culture based on conditions that allow all to participate and express themselves in meaningful ways.

Educators, too, are culture bearers. They bring into classrooms a multitude of ideas, beliefs, and knowledge based on their own experiences. Classrooms are forums where open inquiry and diverse points of view can be expressed. Educators create contexts where students are informed about a variety of perspectives, opinions, and beliefs. It takes a resourceful and knowledgeable teacher committed to cultural change to create an appropriate learning environment where democratic values and cultural variance flourish within a rigorous academic curriculum.

It is important for educators to clarify their own cultural heritage and experience before they embark in the education of others. They must understand how their own culture intersects with the experiences of their students' cultures. Clarifying one's own relationship with other cultural groups requires adopting positive attitudes toward differences. Knowledge about the complexity of people's lives makes it possible to transcend one's limited notions about a specific group. In schools, teachers sometimes make the mistake of teaching curriculum that reflects only the cultural groups represented in their classroom. This is as much a problem as teaching only curriculum that reflects the White mainstream culture.

Every person in the world is part of an ethnic group and belongs to a cultural group, or various cultural groups, depending on their heritage and the society where they live. Antonio Cano, whose home culture resembles his students, is a teacher with many years of teaching experience in the Santa Barbara School District. He explained,

I grew up like my students. I was a Spanish-speaking child, and I can identify with them. I think of the process or the adventure they are going to embark on. So, I tell them that the school district does not see them as individuals. It sees them as a collective group. If they want

to make the system work for them, then they have to be better. They have to make more of an effort; they have to make the district stand up and notice. They have to be exemplary students. Their parents have to put a little bit more time with their kids. Parents have to read to their children. They have to be there for their kids every day. I tell my students that in every school district, there are good, excellent, mediocre, and bad educators. During the good years, when the students have good teachers, they should take advantage of it. When they have mediocre teachers, parents need to carry the ball more.

Antonio assumes the role of mentor to students by teaching them how the system works and encouraging them to excel. Involving students' home culture in the learning setting means that the teacher motivates students to understand human freedom, justice, and equality through diverse cultural values. Such ideals shape a democratic society through the instructional program. This is possible when classroom teachers present curriculum and perspectives that include and reflect values of students from diverse sociocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Positive attitudes about diversity in and out of the classroom also play an important role in influencing students' acceptance of all peoples in society.

Through home visits and interviews, educators learn about the home language and culture that they can integrate into the curriculum. One of the most salient models in creating culturally responsive curriculum is tapping into students' *funds of knowledge*, which includes Latino parents' cultural heritage (Moll, 1992). González, Moll, and Amanti (2005) described how educators, as they learn about their students' home culture, can design culturally responsive curriculum and, in the process, better engage parents in their children's schooling experiences (González et al., 2005; Hensley, 2005).

### Empowerment

As noted, immigrants face linguistic and cultural discontinuity. In my role as researcher, I have met families in pain and despair due to

poverty and unemployment, with little hope of change. Latino parents perceived themselves as powerless in Carpintería, California, but they became involved in the community on behalf of their children and, in the process, they, too, changed (Delgado Gaitan, 2001). In spite of the challenges, they managed to merge their efforts toward change, ultimately transforming their life of strife to one of transcendence. Latino parents organized their group independently from the school to create social and cultural support systems that shaped a political presence in the school and the community at large (Delgado Gaitan, 2001). Through sharing a common language, cultural values, and family ties, these families transcended their hardships by reaching out to one another to expand their opportunities and access to resources.

Community organizing for the purpose of advancing their education is not a new phenomenon for Latinos. It has deep roots to a time in history when legal school, geographic, economic, social, and educational segregation were used against Mexicans (Gonzalez, 1990). In school districts and communities where Latinos organize to advocate for their children, they use their language and culture to learn a new literacy and to give voice to the injustice, isolation, and empowerment to change the power relationships between the schools and themselves. A critical aspect of parent advocacy is for the parent to establish strong communication with the child's teacher. They learned to pose appropriate questions about their own children's education to teachers. Educators became better informed as parents exercised their agency on behalf of their children. Most significantly, parents learned about the educational process enough to hold the school educators accountable.

Schools oftentimes believe that when parents feel overwhelmed in their private lives, they are incapable of supporting their children's school experiences. Although stressful home lives impede parents from assisting their children both at home and at school, the reality is that many families appreciate the opportunity to learn from other families through parent groups. Through collective engagement, we find meaning and the

potential to resolve whatever situations confront us. When parents and educators share power, meaningful change ensues. Collectively, Latino families challenge each other on a family and community level through organized groups that support their growth. These collectives represent safe contexts, where parents express their vulnerabilities to those with whom they share a common history and culture, as well as aspirations for their children's success. In Carpintería, Latino families found themselves evolving into a self that had many possibilities and, collectively, they achieved a goal that seemed difficult to envision when alone. Cultural change and adjustment demand resilience, which the parents underwent on behalf of their children; they require political education and grassroots mobilizing efforts.

### **Conclusion**

Language, culture, and power are the bedrock of family-school relationships. No fixed formula exists for building family-school-community collaborations. What promotes these connections/relationships is our understanding of the conditions in which we come to perceive our ultimate possibilities. Although people may perceive themselves as powerless, in communities with strong family-school partnerships, where the Latino community organizes to advocate for their children, parents transcend negative self-images, whether perceived or real. Living under impoverished conditions, many people put hope in their children's ability to get a good education and find ways to improve their lives. The question is how to best encourage parents and educators to rise above their stressful situations and organize themselves to redirect their pain, frustration, and concerns outward rather than inward.

After the 15-year longitudinal research project in Carpintería, I saw the many gains that families claimed through their years of mobilizing and organizing the community. They learned to build networks with each other, which empowered them and transformed their lives. Much of the Latino potential remains untapped in schools and communities across the United States. Those

effective connections that exist act as pebbles in the water, producing ripples moving outward to create opportunities for people to expand in the face of dissonance.

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