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Communicating With Hispanic Parents of Young, School-Age Children:

Presuppositions and Solutions

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Introduction

The Latino population is the largest racial minority in the United States. Hispanics now constitute at least 17 percent of the nation's total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The projected Hispanic population of the United States by 2050 is 128 million people, or around 30 percent of the total US population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). In 2010, 36 percent of all Hispanics lived in the South, compared to the 21 percent who lived in the North and Midwest. More importantly, over the past ten years, the growth of the Hispanic population was 57 percent – four times more than the growth in population of all Southern states combined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2007) commissioned a report that found that while Hispanic children lagged significantly behind their White peers in kindergarten, the 70 percent deemed English proficient had near identical achievement scores in literacy by grade five. However, the 30 percent of Hispanic students who had little to no English proficiency in kindergarten significantly lagged behind by fifth grade; and both groups (English proficient and non-English proficient) lagged behind in the areas of math, science and social studies. Hispanic students are less likely to graduate, less likely to attend college, and more likely to live in poverty than their White counterparts.

As teachers of early childhood, we need to acknowledge the impact of these facts of life and adjust our teaching style and mindset to accommodate these dramatic changes. Closing the achievement gap for Hispanic students is a daunting task, but as teachers, we can take steps towards reaching this goal. Some of the ways we can improve our Hispanic students chances of being successful include: understanding our own presuppositions and those of Hispanic parents towards education, self-reflecting on possible cultural biases in the classroom, implementing and

encouraging community based programs, and adjusting classroom practices. While we may not be able to guarantee high achievement for all of our students, we can enhance our classroom environment to help them learn.

Preschool Enrollment in Latino Communities

Latino students enter school already behind their peers. During the fall of their kindergarten year, 75 percent of White students could recognize their letters compared with only half of Hispanic students (Pre-K Now Research Series, 2006). It turns out that Hispanic students simply are not attending preschool in the same numbers as their White classmates. Only about 49 percent of Hispanics attend some kind of center-based childcare or preschool program from age three to five (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). If we look at the populations below the poverty line who qualify for free or reduced rates for attending preprimary programs, we find that even fewer Hispanic families participate. Of the families who qualify, 36 percent of Latino families enroll in these programs, while 65 percent of Blacks and 45 percent of Whites enroll. When we take a look at the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program, a program specifically designed for children of farmworkers and their families, the percent of eligible participants is even lower (National Council of La Raza, 2007).

When assessed, preschool-age Mexican and Latino students show a sizable lag in cognitive and language skills. Studies indicate that Latina mothers are less likely to read to their children, have higher rates of depression, have lower rates of employment, and less higher education (Guerrero, 2012). On average, Hispanic mothers talk less with their children than White mothers and have fewer literacy-related materials in their households (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007).

In combination, these factors affect how students of preschool age learn and develop. Why are Hispanic families not sending their child to preschool? Speculation varies, but research has found that there may be inadequate capacity for preschools to meet the enrollment demands in some Hispanic communities. Many families may have too high of an income for Head Start but too low of an income to be able to pay the high price of local preschools. Additionally, an estimated one-eighth of Hispanic families are believed to lack the necessary documents to enroll their children, thus completely shutting them out of preschool opportunities (Garcia & Garcia, 2012).

Early childhood education for this population is critical for future success. Instead of condemning these families for not participating in programs, educators need to join with Hispanic families and communities to find resources to support the early education of this growing population.

Cultural Perspectives

As teachers, we make assumptions about the family lives of our students based on SES, parental involvement, and student achievement. We need to understand that Hispanics also make assumptions about school and the way the school system operates based on their own personal experiences and cultural values. The Hispanic culture has five strong values that play into how they may view and interact with American schools.

Foremost, the Hispanic culture places a very strong emphasis on a core family structure known as *familismo* (Suizzo, Jackson, Pahlke, Marroquin, Blondaue, & Martinez, 2012). Suizzo and colleagues depict *familismo* as “a multidimensional construct that includes the dimension of maintaining a strong attachment to family through feelings of reciprocity, loyalty, closeness and the dimension of feeling a duty to family and conforming to traditions and rules established by

elders” (p. 36). Teachers need to understand that when they interact with a Hispanic family, the welfare of the child extends not only to the parents, but to cousins, grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

Over the past 50 years, the United States education system has emphasized parental involvement, which seems to be compatible with *familismo*. However, our system values individual achievement and success. American parents are encouraged to stay involved in their children’s lives, and encourage self-esteem, self-reliance and individuation. American youth are encouraged to be independent, push boundaries, and set themselves apart from social convention. Our education system emphasizes reaching individual aspirations rather than promoting societal and community goals (Hill & Torres, 2010).

Personalismo, dignidad, obligacion, and respeto are core values that are also deeply rooted in the Hispanic culture (Hill, 2009). *Personalismo* is a trust in people over institutions and a genuine interest in people and their welfare. Alongside *personalismo*, *dignidad* foregrounds the honor and worth of people. *Respeto* is the idea that people fundamentally deserve respect. Finally, *obligacion* is the cultural belief that teachers have responsibility for all students and know what is best for each child’s education (Hill, 2009). *Obligacion* makes it especially difficult for parents to push back against a teacher if something does not seem right in the classroom.

Familismo, personalismo, dignidad, obligacion, and respeto may all sound like cultural values anyone can appreciate, but as Americans we often lack an understanding for how profoundly these values affect thinking and action. In an interview, bilingual elementary resource teacher Aurora Cedillo described the stance many Hispanic parents take: “They trust that the teachers and other school staff will do what is best for their child. In the subconscious mind, the

teacher holds a sacred place. Next to God and mom, the teacher is respected and honored. Parents will not invade a teacher's space unless an obvious act of violence or disregard for the child are exposed" (Diller & Moule, 2005). It is easy to see the difference between this attitude and how many other contemporary parents think about teachers and schooling. As early childhood educators, we need to understand and respect the cultural values of Hispanic families rather than seeking to "re-socialize" them to better "fit" the dominant culture (Hill, 2009, p. 112).

Reexamining our Presuppositions

Presuppositions about Latino parents can get in the way of understanding. As teachers, we make assumptions about our students that are often unfounded. For example, we may believe that Hispanic students lack the presence of both parents at home. In fact, 57 percent of Hispanic students live with both of their parents, compared with 69 percent of White students and 30 percent of Black students (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). When these numbers are readjusted to represent children whose parents are immigrant, non-US born, 71 percent of Hispanic students live with both parents.

Researchers have studied how parental socialization of academics affects Hispanic student achievement. They probed the Hispanic culture to determine what kind of attitudes families imparted on their children. The study found that these families strongly encourage academic achievement and associate a sense of family honor tied to success in school (Suizzo et al., 2012). This information should encourage teachers who are discouraged by the gap in achievement of their Hispanic students. We do have partners in education in the form of our students' parents. But how can we properly engage them?

Making Family and Community Connections

Leonard A. Valverde (2006), director of the Hispanic Border Leadership Institute, suggests offering English classes to older students, parents of students, and grandparents. He also recommends getting adults to read to their children in Spanish. Parents of language-minority students have been shown to deeply care about the literacy development of their children, but often teachers or school personnel are not taking full advantage or interest into parental resources and involvement (Garcia & Garcia, 2012). Eugene and Erminda Garcia (2012) recommend an activity called “Sharing from Home” to increase parental involvement and improve literacy. Students are given a worksheet that reads, “My object from home is a ____, it is/has _____, we use it to _____. It helps me remember (cultural point)_____” (p. 54). This kind of worksheet lets students bring in objects that are specific to their culture/family, while also encouraging students to reflect on why these objects are important to their families. Parents of children participating in activities like this will see that their heritage and culture are valued in the classroom.

As the number of Hispanic students in preschools and elementary schools in the United States dramatically increases, the percentage of teachers who identify as Hispanic remains at a mere seven percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-2008). But non-Hispanic teachers I can contribute to an atmosphere of acceptance by making changes in the school environment. Garcia and Garcia (2012) suggest several school-wide practices that will enhance the education and literacy of Hispanic children. They recommend, “Responsive Communities of Practice” (2012, p. 38). These communities require three tiers of response between Latino students and teachers. First, teachers can gather an “assessment of child and family history” (p. 36). We know how valuable it is to get to know our students, and breaking down cultural stereotypes can begin with simply asking about a child’s family and past. Second, an evaluation of formal care and early schooling history gives teachers an idea of where the child is coming

from. Who has primarily cared for the child? Did the child attend preschool? Third, a negotiation of cultural practices can take place.

Additionally, Garcia and Garcia (2012) recommend adopting a school-wide vision clearly defined by acceptance and diversity, collaboration and flexibility for change, elimination of policies that marginalize students, and reflection with surrounding families and children. For the caregiver or teacher, they recommend promoting bilingual skills/awareness, professional development specifically tailored to the education of Latino students, maximizing children and family interaction, and meaningful interactions for language development.

As educators we need to value diversity, support bilingual literacy, and push for more access to high quality early childhood programs. We need to be in contact with local centers to get information about preschools. Nearly every city has a funded center or support group sponsored by a non-profit or church that seeks to address the specific needs of the Hispanic community. The local Hispanic Center can give a teacher a better understanding of the needs of individual communities as well as offer advice on how to bridge the gap of communication. A teacher can ask to speak to some of the regularly attending families about their experiences with the local school system and seek advice on how to best meet the needs of Hispanic students. Our schools can create information packets for local families that include preschool information, community involvement opportunities, English classes, and school expectations.

Classroom Connections

Why is it that fluency in other languages is sometimes seen as debilitating? When we realize that speaking Spanish is not a negative condition to overcome, but a valuable asset, our teaching and administrative practices are much improved. As early childhood teachers, we have a considerable amount of power to shape what happens in our classrooms. The first step to

bridging the gap between children of Hispanic descent and their White peers is fostering environments that encourage learning *everywhere*. Teachers sometimes assume that if a parent does not read to his or her child in English, there is no literacy going on in the household. In fact, this is not true. Murcillo points out the value of bilingual literacy in the homes of native Spanish-speakers to develop students' literacy, while encouraging families to be agents of change in their children's education. Murcillo describes how one parent expressed concern over reading to her child in Spanish because it may hinder her English. In fact, research has shown the opposite. Students who are raised in bilingual households and are encouraged to read in both languages make greater gains than their single language speaking counterparts (Murcillo, 2012).

We want all our students see themselves as learners. We want to develop a culture of literature and love for reading, but so often our students cannot see themselves in the stories we read and ask them to read. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin compiles yearly statistics about books published by and about people of color. In the year 2013, Latinos wrote around 1.5 percent of children's books published; and of all of the books published, only 1.7 percent were about Latinos (CCBC, 2014). The numbers of books may be small, but this is all the more reason for teachers to find and share as many books that feature Hispanics as possible.

Another effective way to foster literacy is Writer's Workshop. Writer's Workshop is a type of writing instruction that puts the power of language in the hands of the students. Writer's Workshop takes the focus off of the finished product of writing, and centers on the idea of writing itself. Each day children are allowed a block of time to work on whichever type of writing they choose. With careful teacher guidance, students are kept cognizant of which stage in the writing process they are in. The teacher guides them as they begin to develop an

understanding for the various stages in writing, and as they explore and develop vocabulary. When students are ready to “publish,” the teacher helps them correct grammar mistakes, adjust sentence format, and focus their main ideas. This type of writing activity has proven to be beneficial to children from every SES, race, and gender (Garcia and Garcia, 2012). Especially for Hispanic children who may have little experience with spoken and written, English, Writer’s Workshop is a safe space for them to take risks in using language and an effective way to accelerate their reading and writing development.

Find Out More

It is important for teachers to learn as much as they can about cultural differences. We need to take advantage of all the resources available to support our multicultural teaching. Even the little things make a huge difference in the classroom. For example, it is important to realize that typical behavior can vary amongst family units in the same culture. Small behaviors like not making eye contact with authority figures may seem different and even disrespectful, but these may be culturally accepted and encouraged within the Latino culture (Hill, 2009).

Community-based intervention programs can be one of the most effective ways to make a difference in Hispanic families’ lives. We need to take time to investigate what programs may be offered in our communities so that you we can help the families of our students access these opportunities. The programs described below are examples that are available in the Southeast United States.

Abriendo Puertas

Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, & Virginia

http://www.nhsa.org/initiatives_and_partnerships/abriendo_puertas__opening_doors_network

Abriendo Puertas is a program that “aims to improve the outcomes of the nation’s Latino children by building the capacity and confidence of parents to be strong and powerful advocates in the lives of their children” (2014). This Head Start supported, community based program was evaluated for effectiveness by UC Berkeley and supports school readiness through ten weekly sessions focused on language development, health, parent leadership, bilingualism, early literacy, planning for success, and socio-emotional wellness.

FLAME - Family Literacy: Apriendo, Mejorando, Educando

South Carolina

www.uic.edu/educ/flame/flameobjectives.html

FLAME “helps to improve reading and writing tasks as a result of their parents’ knowledge about literacy and enhanced opportunities for learning at home” (2014). The program works with literacy modeling, opportunity, home-school relations, using curriculum based on, “book sharing, book selection, book fairs and using the library, teaching the abc’s, creating home literacy centers, math at home, children’s writing, homework help, classroom observations, parent-teacher get-togethers, community literacy, songs games and language.”

PIQE – Early Childhood Development Program

Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida

PIQE “helps parents prepare their children for the pre-K and kindergarten classroom” (2014). Topics include “brain development, health, nutrition and active living, positive discipline techniques, pre-reading skills and language development, early math, and finding social services within the school and local community.”

HIPPY - Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters

Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, & Florida

HIPPY is “a developmentally appropriate curriculum, with role play as the method of teaching, staffed by home visitors from the community, supervised by a professional coordinator” (e.g. “About us,” 2013, para.1). HIPPY provides parents with their own curriculum and instruction on how to best educate their child. HIPPY is committed to providing an abundance of literacy materials to help strengthen early literacy acquisition (2013).

Tennessee Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten

http://www.tn.gov/education/earlylearning/prek/doc/Scope_of_Services.pdf

Tennessee is one of the states to make a commitment to offer free, voluntary, pre-Kindergarten for eligible families. Teachers can help by researching and providing information to Hispanic families who may not know they are able to receive this kind of service. TN Voluntary Pre-K partners with local organizations or existing preschools to provide access for all students to pre-k who qualify.

Conclusion

More and more Hispanic children will be entering the classrooms of more and more teachers. Early childhood teachers need to learn all they can about the needs and strengths of their Hispanic students. Not every teacher can be bilingual or formally trained in ESL practices, but every teacher can make changes to his or her mindset, research more about Hispanic culture, and become an informed advocate for high quality multicultural education in his or her community.

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