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# How to Make Parent Workshops Effective for Immigrant Families

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*"When I came to this country it was to offer my daughter a better life. The crossing was very hard and very sad because I was alone... These were very hard times. Even now, there are days when there is no food. But nevertheless, I always tell my daughter that she needs to study a lot, and fight for all that she most wants and never to have a situation like mine: so hard and difficult."* (This is but one family's explanation of why they came to the U.S.)

Under the auspices of the Teachers Network Leadership Institute, in conjunction with the Chicago Foundation for Education, I participated in a two year (2005-2007) applied research project. Over that time, I taught bilingual (Spanish) first grade classes, where 44 families came from Mexico, and seven hailed from other Latin American countries. All communication with my families was in Spanish. Forty-seven of the 51 families were eligible for free lunch. Five mothers graduated from high school (two of those in the U.S.). Two mothers were fluent in English, though there were several whose English skills were increasing. This is not to suggest that one culture is somehow more important than another. In fact, in my classroom, cultural differences were always looked on as one of the more important aspects of living in the United States. However, knowledge of English can be an indication of the length of time a family has lived here as well as the amount of acculturation taken place. I found the latter tended to increase families' understanding of school expectations and usually correlated with students' academic success.

The school where this study and my teaching took place was located in a residential neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. It continues to have one of the most diverse populations in the city, with at least 40 home languages represented. The Spanish native-speaking population totals about 40% within the school, second only to English. At the school, issues of language learning, parent involvement and family communication were paramount and were continually discussed. Ideas to enhance the families' participation were both encouraged and welcomed. However, we were not always successful in reaching families other than for report card conferences or open houses. As in many urban schools, teachers were often frustrated with the low parent turnout for school programs. This does not suggest, however, that our parents devalue education. As the quotation above implies, most immigrant families came to this country in order to give their children a chance for a better education than they received. What it does suggest is that it is the teachers' responsibility to find ways to encourage families to participate in those school programs.

Though interacting with families, I found that one of their primary reasons for immigrating to the United States was for the accessibility of a quality education. Many families spoke of the limited capacity of education available in their home countries and many of the mothers in my classes received no more than a third or fourth grade education. These mothers wanted the best for their

children and were willing to help them in whatever ways they can. For example, there was almost always a 100% daily response to homework.

Many, however, were not familiar with our educational system or its expectations. This was evidenced by the frequent questions with which parents came to me regarding communication from the administration or from other teachers. Their limited knowledge created a disconnect between what they wanted to do and what they felt they could or should do to help their children. In my experience, because of the respect that is given to teachers, the mothers were hesitant to take initiative in academic areas unless told to do so by the teacher for fear that they might somehow interfere. Furthermore, most mothers came from systems of education with different expectations for parent involvement. In their educational experiences, the families and teachers were separate and distinct from one another. Additionally, because the majority of mothers in my classes did not work outside the home, did not drive, had limited incomes, had limited English skills, and were responsible for the care of all the children, they were relatively restricted in their access to enriching experiences. Therefore, I took on the role of teaching parents about our system of education and its expectations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Henderson and Mapp (2002) summarize results from more than 50 studies on parent involvement and its impact on children's academic success in this country. They explain that family involvement at home helps students progress successfully in a new and unknown educational system and through such involvement, students are more likely to remain in schools. Additionally, they state that students with highly involved parents are more likely to perform well in both reading and math than do children with less involved parents.

According to Roybal and Garcia (2004), Mexico's educational system relies heavily on rote memorization and copying and tends to have large class sizes (as many as 50-60 students). Additionally, instruction is formal in which students sit in rows and work independently, and parents expect a formal curriculum. So, when families enroll their children in U.S. schools, many do not realize that their active involvement in schools is desired or expected. Essentially, a belief is held that the schools instill knowledge and parents should not interfere (Montecel, 1996; Nicolau & Ramos, 1990). Given these assumptions about the roles of home and school, it is not surprising that there would be some misunderstandings.

Family income has been shown to be a significant predictor of academic success. In a comparison of families in Great Britain (Webster & Feiler, 1998), teachers were asked to suggest which children showed progress in literacy and which they felt were in jeopardy. The identified children's literacy behaviors were observed in their homes. Webster and Feiler found that the most significant predictors of a child's success in school were family income level, the level of the mother's education, and the number of children in the family. The students who progressed most were those from higher income families with more educated mothers and with fewer siblings. The significant risk factors, then, seemed to place my students at risk: the majority was low-income, at least three-quarters of the mothers had schooling to the 3rd grade, and more than half of the families had three or more children.

Dunsmuir and Blatchford (2004) and Reese and Gallimore (2000) looked at other literacy behaviors in Latino/a families. They indicated that reading to a baby was not considered important because the babies could not talk, so they would not be able to understand the words. The mothers they observed erased many of the writing marks their young children had made on their papers, apparently not realizing that a child's scribbling is a precursor to writing. Only neat and conventionally correct writing was deemed acceptable. These assumptions about literacy were in contrast with the more developmental approach to emergent literacy espoused by these researchers and my school.

These studies made it clear how important families are to the academic success of children. But, simply stating that it's important to read to students or to encourage inventive spelling will not necessarily yield parental follow through because the educational systems and beliefs about learning are too dissimilar. Reese and Gallimore (2000) state that educators need to provide learning opportunities for families that take place over a period of time, as long-term experiences with families have had the most success in stimulating change.

### SETTING THE STAGE

My task, therefore, was to find appropriate methods to facilitate my families' learning about our expectations for involving parents in the education of their children. But, this could not be done in a single "one night stand". Therefore, I decided to offer a series of parent workshops. I was particularly interested in children's developmental writing process because it allows children opportunities to write their thoughts without the stigma of being right or wrong. Scribbling, practice with putting letters together, and drawing are all considered precursors to more formalized writing. However, as noted before, these very different ideas about writing than with which parents were familiar.

For my sessions, I decided to use a modified version of parent writing experiences drawn from two studies, one in Los Angeles and one from Detroit. In the Los Angeles study by Martinez and Romo (2003), teachers helped parents to understand the writing process by going through their own writing process. This project was conducted with a population similar to mine: immigrant families who "have minimal schooling and/or writing ability" (p.23). In the second study, Curry (1998) describes how a teacher in the Detroit Public Schools worked with parents to demonstrate the value and importance of writing and how that attitude can be transferred to children. Since each study suggested how important it was for the parents to do their own writing, my sessions would include this as well.

However, I struggled to find the best language to advertise the workshops. Initially, I named the sessions "writing workshops" although I did not think that was the best terminology. My reticence to use the "writing workshop" nomenclature proved to be appropriate when one parent responded to me by saying that she would not be attending because "she already knew how to write". I immediately sent home a short follow-up note to all families explaining that I hoped they knew that I was not going to teach "writing" because I knew they knew how to write. That parent's response made me realize that asking parents to come to a workshop in order to "learn to write" may have been deemed patronizing. It highlighted my nagging feeling that as teachers sometimes we forget that our parents, in fact, are capable. I then further explained that the

workshops would be for parents "to pretend" to be their children and "to do" the same kinds of writing activities as were done in the classroom.

The parent workshops were offered during three consecutive weeks, in three one-hour sessions. I initially informed the parents about the workshops (and that a raffle would be held after each session) through a flyer and in my newsletter. A reminder notice was sent before the first session, and phone calls were made before the third session. In the first year, 10 of 25 families attended the sessions.

After the first year, I realized, as suggested in the literature (Reese & Gallimore, 2000), that more contact was needed. I was much more pro-active the second year in publicizing the workshops. For example, after each session I sent a personalized "Thank you" to those who attended, and a personalized "Sorry we missed you" to those who did not. Flyers were sent two days before each session. I gave stickers the next day, to each child whose parent attended. Each day when I saw parents at dismissal, I reminded them of the upcoming session. I also wrote generic thank you notes in my newsletter, describing what we had done each time. The result of the more intense advertising was significant, in the second year there were 18 of 26 parents attending.

During both years of the project, each workshop focused on a different strategy of writing/reading. Each strategy was selected not only because of the ease in teaching it or the short time needed to learn it (due to the very short time of each workshop), but also because each could easily be taught in the home. Strategies included taking "picture walks", using graphic organizers, writing letters to their children, writing summaries of science readings, and supporting their child's writing by applying a rubric to their child's writing journal. This last experience was done to introduce the parents to the concept of a rubric, an evaluative tool which their children would encounter with increasing frequency as they progressed in school. However, I learned during the sessions that in addition to attaching the rubric, I also needed to attach an explanation for each rubric category and a "high scoring" and a "low scoring" writing sample. Later in the year I sent home children's writing journals for parents to evaluate. Those who had attended the workshop and were provided with a rubric, were consistently better at reviewing and supporting their child's work.

Each workshop was offered twice, once immediately after school and once in the early evening. Free babysitting, a raffle and a snack were also provided. The reasons for offering the afternoon session included 1) most of the mothers did not work outside the home and were already at school at dismissal time to pick up their children; 2) almost none of the mothers drive; 3) most were nervous about coming by themselves and/or with their children at night; and 4) of those who worked, many had shift work which precluded their coming in the evenings. The early evening session was for those few who did work earlier.

The results discussed in the next session were drawn from the following data: my reflections; session videotapes; parent surveys; parent reviews of students' journals; student work (comparing work over time on the basis of number of sessions in which parents participated).

## RESULTS

Over the two years, the afternoon workshops had a significantly higher and more consistent attendance than the evening ones. Although most parents were consistent in their choice of time, some alternated. In the afternoon in year one, the three sessions were attended by six, four, and five mothers, respectively; in the evening the attendance was three, two and two. In the second year, of the 18 families, a total of 12 different families participated at least once in the afternoon and six families participated at least once at night. Three fathers attended once. During the first year, three mothers attended all three sessions. During the second year, 10 mothers participated in all three workshops. As Webster and Feiler (1998) identified, I found that the six children who progressed the most were those whose mothers were the most active participants in the workshops. And the reverse was also true: of the six children who made the least progress, two of their mothers participated only once, while the other four mothers had not participated at all. The evaluations were based on the standardized assessment known as DIBLES—a timed, individually given, fluency, vocabulary, and phonics test.

The first year's sessions were held in March. The advantage was that I had already developed a trusting relationship with many of the families. This, I believe, allowed for more open sharing of feelings and ideas (especially with me). The disadvantages were the very inconsistent weather; the fact that the sun goes down around 4:30, making it difficult to walk home with young children or to come to school in the evening; and the fact that more than half of the school year was over, so that there was less time to help their children (though hopefully the information could be used in subsequent years). At the end of the last session of the first year, I asked the mothers who were the most consistent participants for their suggestions regarding the schedule of workshops and the times for them. Independently, each of the four mothers stated that having three in a row was better for their schedules and that the afternoons were especially good for them because of their commitments at home.

Based on my reflections from the original workshops, for the second year I offered them in the fall. Although I had not yet developed relationships with the parents, the advantage was having parents meet me in a more relaxed situation early in the year, and providing them with information about the curriculum. This, in addition to the more intense advertising, was more likely a part of the reason for the greater participants. Also, in Chicago, the weather is not as variable in September and, importantly, it was still daylight savings time, so that even in the early evenings there was still light. One disadvantage of the fall meetings was that since the families did not know me as well, they were perhaps slightly less comfortable sharing their thoughts. Having more than one session and offering them in three consecutive weeks, however, enabled those trusting relationships to develop.

Each year after the final workshop, I asked parents to reflect on their experience. For example, when asked about the differences between how writing is taught here versus in their native countries, there were several very astute observations. In our sessions, we had discussed different ways to increase vocabulary and its importance. One responded that the "teaching of vocabulary is more direct here." In the sessions we discussed that copying is an important skill which the children do in class, but that it is not the most important part of the writing process. Another respondent noted that, "The teachers in Mexico didn't explain much. They only wrote words on the board and the children had to copy them." Other comments included, "There was no writing for expression" and "I always read to the teacher and she would always correct me a

lot. Here the children are allowed to practice reading.” As such, many mothers recognized and articulated some of the major differences between the two educational experiences.

Also, at the end of the second year’s workshops, some parents explained what they would do to facilitate writing at home. At the first session, the mothers initially made a limited list of when they "write" (letters, alphabet, or homework). But by the last session, the participants expanded their views of what writing was and how they could support their child’s writing and literacy development at home. For example, parents stated, "I will read and write everyday", "I will help him to write fun stories", "I will help him to learn by ‘playing’ with him as practice, so as not to be so boring", and finally "I am going to buy paper and pencils so she can write at home when and what she wants. I will buy her books that have places to write things in them. I will make sure to be enthusiastic about whatever she writes, no matter how small a note or a card.”

## DISCUSSION

### Unexpected Outcomes

Developing a community of mothers was an unexpected benefit, though in retrospect it makes sense. Many of the mothers were isolated from other families. For example, most mothers indicated they only went outside of their homes to go to the store, to church, to school, or to a neighbor’s home. Further, when the mothers left their homes, they always walked with their children, no matter the distance or weather. Child care was rarely a consideration. The mothers were also away from their own natal families, most of whom were still in either Mexico or another Latin American country. The support that one receives from family, therefore, is often not available to these mothers. Some have related to me their fears about going outside, when in fact, our community is relatively safe to walk around, especially in the daytime. The mothers who did not work outside the home had limited experience interacting with other mothers outside of their immediate surroundings.

The issue of isolation was highlighted when one of the mothers was wary of leaving her six-year old child, a boy from my class, in the babysitting room. The child cried bitterly as the mother departed. The babysitter was Latina and the school’s babysitting service was one that other Latina mothers used when taking ESL or other adult classes. The mother stated that she had never left any of her children with anyone, other than her 12-year-old son and then only briefly. Soon both the mother and the child grew so accustomed to the childcare that she became a regular workshop attendee. Perhaps this will encourage her to take part in other similar situations/occasions. Had other mothers had not attended the workshops for the same reason? Perhaps older siblings could be utilized in some way in future workshops.

However, throughout my workshops, the mothers joked with each other, even with those previously unknown to them, they included me in their humor, and they asked each other questions about their respective children's behavior. More importantly, because of the comfort level which had developed as a result of the experiences I had had with these families, after one of the workshops, I was approached in confidence by two parents who told me of a very serious situation in one of the families. They felt that I would be able to inform responsible persons who could get help. The next day I consulted with our school social worker, who followed up immediately. I am certain that a possible suicide was averted. A similar experience occurred

another time when a husband of a participant died suddenly. The mothers responded more quickly with food and money because of the familiarity which had developed in our small settings. The personal nature of this after-school activity provided a forum and fostered a caring community that the parents would not have experienced in either an all-school workshop or a similar type of large group experience. These same mothers thanked me for offering the workshops and expressed their wish that other teachers would do the same.

The workshop groups developed a level of camaraderie with me as well. On the videos it was clear how we enjoyed ourselves during parts of the experience, laughing and teasing one another. Parents felt comfortable enough to correct my Spanish usage. I encouraged that by also participating in the writing experiences. Their correcting of my Spanish language usage empowered the mothers and demonstrated that they had something to teach me and to offer to the workshops. I believe it made the workshops less intimidating for the mothers. My being an active member of the group, and not just an observer, gave the participants the message that we were all learning. When the parents realized that they, in fact, were much better at something than the teacher, barriers were broken. Parents gained a sense of confidence because it suggested that they were equally as capable as the teacher, an idea which may have translated into the realization that they could help their children at home, and that the roles did not have to be so separate.

Further, because of the rapport which I had developed with these mothers, they were the ones I asked to be my parent representatives when some observers came to the class as part of an award interview process. The teachers from the award evaluation committee commented to me later that each of the parents noted how much they had gotten from the parent workshops and how, as a result, they felt closer to me. Later, I was able to stay within the homes of these families after receiving a grant allowing me to visit the actual schools my families attended in Mexico and Guatemala while growing up. Thus, I learned first-hand about the educational experiences of my families.

### Subtle Classroom Changes

Since the workshops were geared to parents and not to the classroom, systematic data collection was not done as to the possible impact the workshops may have had on my teaching. However, upon reflection, it seems clear that there were some subtle changes made in the delivery of instruction. One such change was that I became more deliberate and consistent about following-up on a student's response with questions such as "Why do you think that?". A second subtle change was that I also became more deliberate and consistent about encouraging more conversations related to those same responses. I did this by following-up with such phrases as "Tell me more about..." or "Give us more information about..." On reflection, it is clear that these changes resulted directly from the experiences with my families in the parent workshops. For example, while "pretending to be their children", it became clear to me that, although the parents may have completed their "assignments", there was minimal questioning about those assignments. Rarely did a parent ask "why" or ask for clarification about a topic or a task. This limited questioning was consistent with what I had learned from the surveys regarding parents' own school experiences. Similarly, it is also consistent with Reese and Gallimore's (2000) findings regarding conversations in the homes. Therefore, I realized that not only were the parent

workshops be necessary for the families to learn about our expectations, but it was also necessary for their children to learn about inquiry. It finally became clear that the children were going to be the real teachers for their parents.

### Moving Forward: Next Steps and Recommendations

To begin, I think it would have been helpful to have given a short questionnaire at the end of each workshop, rather like "exit slips" to both evaluate the experience for the participant, and to suggest to me directions for the next workshop. This would have made it clear to parents that their opinions were valued. It also may have encouraged even more participation because the parents would have been instrumental in tailoring the workshops to their needs. Similarly, at the beginning of the first workshop and at the end of the third one, as a kind of "pre-test" and "post-test", it would have been useful to ask the mothers to write their own ideas about writing. This could be used as a way to evaluate learning by the parents.

What follows are my key findings and recommendations to other practitioners seeking to increase family involvement.

#### 1) School events need to be offered at times appropriate for all families.

Open houses, curriculum events, science fairs, etc. should take place both during the day *and* at night. Report card day should start earlier and end later at night, with a longer break in the middle of the day for the teachers. For those teachers for whom two presentations might cause problems with their own personal situations, there could be a sharing of the responsibilities: one teacher providing the information during the day, while another does so at night. This would have the added benefit of demonstrating to families that all the teachers at the school teach in a similar way, that their curriculum is aligned, and that one teacher is as good as another. Scheduling can be done in creative ways as well. When I offered open house immediately after the children entered the building, I had the largest attendance I had ever had. Both mothers *and* fathers attended, something that had not happened before.

#### 2) Parent involvement cannot be an add-on or an afterthought.

While there may not be a direct link between workshop attendance and test scores, there was a definite relationship between parental involvement and academic success. Thoughtfully planning for and implementing sessions to increase parent participation in their child's learning will benefit students, parents, and teachers. The key concept is "thoughtful" and being mindful of how sessions are organized and to position parents as contributors and collaborators.

#### 3) Parent workshops should be offered by the individual teachers, not as a whole school activity.

I offered this same series of workshops to all of the preK-3 bilingual classes. Most of those families knew me, and still seven of the 11 participants were from my class. The child's teacher is the person with whom the parents have a vested interest in getting to know. The corollary being that the child's teacher has a vested interest in becoming a kind of "ombudsman" for the larger educational system that the families must negotiate. Finally, for all school events, each teacher should sign their respective copy, in advance of duplicating, which could then be distributed to each individual teacher's classroom. Parents will then assume that their child's teacher is asking for the family's participation in the event.

4.) It is critical to develop a community of parents.

As important as it is to develop a positive classroom community among students, so is it true among families. They can use each other for babysitters, for transportation, or for finding information about resources. They can use each other as a support group. The teacher, however, must also be an active member of this community in order to enable families, teachers and students to all become life-long learners.

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