

Effectiveness of Understanding Relations between Community, Home, and School for Future Educators¹

La Importancia de Comprender la Relación entre la Comunidad, Hogar y Escuela para la Formación de Futuros Educadores

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Abstract

As educators committed to preparing teachers to teach effectively across differences and in ways that actively resist perpetuating injustices, we have found that designing opportunities that take teachers into the children's community is the best way to learn about the cultural wealth existing in homes and to understand the importance of including parents in the education of their children. College students from a graduate program at a public institution were asked to engage in community, neighborhood and home visits to reflect on their understanding of the relationship among community, home, and schools. As a result of these interactions, the students came to a new and deeper understanding of the importance of bringing together communities, schools, and homes to create an optimum environment for student success.

Key words: literacy development, parental involvement, cultural practices, families, teacher preparation programs, educators

Resumen

Como educadoras comprometidas con la formación de maestros que enseñen de manera eficaz a niños de diferentes culturas y lenguas, y a pesar de las diferencias, se opongan activamente a perpetuar cualquier clase de injusticia.

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Para alcanzar este objetivo, se encontró que el diseñar oportunidades para que los maestros puedan acercarse a las comunidades de origen de los niños, es la mejor manera de conocer la riqueza cultural existente en los hogares y para entender la importancia de incluir a los padres en la educación de sus hijos. Para esta investigación, los estudiantes de un programa de posgrado de una institución pública fueron invitados a participar en la comunidad, barrio y hogares de los estudiantes para reflexionar sobre su comprensión de la relación entre la comunidad, hogar y escuela. Como resultado de estas interacciones, los estudiantes llegaron a un nuevo y más profundo entendimiento de la importancia de integrar la comunidad, escuela y hogar para crear un entorno óptimo para el éxito del estudiante.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo de la lecto-escritura, participación de los padres, prácticas culturales, familias, programa de formación de docentes, educadores

Resumo

Como educadoras comprometidas com a formação de mestres que ensinam de maneira eficaz a crianças de diferentes culturas e línguas, e apesar das diferenças, se oponham ativamente a perpetuar qualquer classe de injustiça. Para alcançar este objetivo, encontrou-se que o desenhar oportunidades para que os mestres possam aproximar-se às comunidades de origem das crianças, a melhor maneira de conhecer a riqueza cultural existente nos lares e para entender a importância de incluir os pais na educação de seus filhos. Para esta pesquisa, os estudantes de um programa de pós-graduação de uma instituição pública foram convidados a participar na comunidade, bairro e lares dos estudantes para refletir sobre a sua compreensão da relação entre a comunidade, lar e escola. Como resultado destas interações, os estudantes chegaram a um novo e mais profundo entendimento da importância de integrar a comunidade, escola e lar, para criar um entorno ótimo para o êxito do estudante.

Palavras chave: Desenvolvimento da leito-escritura, participação dos pais, práticas culturais, famílias, programa de formação de docentes, educadores

Introduction

The question that served as the impetus for this paper was, “How can we help educators realize the wealth and relevance that culturally and linguistically diverse families and students bring to school?” Preparing teachers to effectively teach across socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and gender differences is complicated by a lack

of familiarity with or valuing of the cultures, learning styles, and communication patterns of diverse groups (Bohn & Sleeter, 2000). Today, of the 74 million children in the United States (defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as those under 18 years of age), the ethnic groups are: White, 59%; Hispanic, 19%; Black, 15%; Asian, 4%; and Other, 3% (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006). However, 90% of the teachers serving these students are white.

Because our nation's teaching force is predominantly white, female, and middle-class, decisions, values, and perceptions are likely to be derived from lived experiences very different from those of the increasingly diverse student population. The ways in which this negatively impacts the education of diverse populations has been well documented (Katz, 1999; Rodriguez, 1993).

Our attempt to answer the question of how to better prepare teachers to effectively teach across differences resulted in designing assignments that scaffolded teachers' exploration and incorporation of family cultures and contexts into their teaching. In this article we share the benefits of a stream of assignments designed to help teachers understand the wealth of knowledge that exists in the homes of their students, and the importance of the relationship between community, home, and school. Then, we address methods used by the instructors. Next, we explore the challenges and benefits that arose from these experiences, highlighting how integrating family events into educational experiences helps make educators "insiders" in the community, adding another dimension to the relationship with students, families, and community. Lastly, we reflect on our experiences.

One could argue that the interaction between parents and children has not changed substantially, at least in relation to the expectations that parents have about their children's education. As JoBeth Allen discusses in her book *Literacy in the Welcoming Classroom* (2010), expectations of parents regarding the education of children has remained the same over the past 20 years although academic and institutional requirements have changed. The current stream of assignments explores the relationships between parents and children, the educational expectations, and the importance of building relationships among community, home and school. The objective of this paper is to share how various methods may help in discovering the customs, household practices, and cultural wealth and values of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. The use of these methods can help educators learn better teaching practices, understand the wealth that diversity possesses, and provide equal learning opportunities for all children. Reflecting on these issues continues to help us understand the important role that families

play in the education of children and that, even though society changes, intercultural bridges help create a critical and active education.

Literature Review

Traditionally in the United States, immigrant students, or those who do not speak English as their first language, have not received the same treatment as students from the dominant culture (Valenzuela, 1999; Bartolome, 1994). The cultural practices of their native countries or homes are often undervalued or simply ignored. Evidence suggests that culturally and linguistically diverse students experience poorer educational outcomes than their peers, and this reality is associated with several factors (Bennett et al., 2004; Conchas Noguera, 2004). These include low teacher expectations, lack of parent availability due to work schedules, and language differences between home and school.

Unfortunately, although many educators say they want to involve parents in the educational experiences of students, parents are generally excluded and treated contemptuously because they are low income, have a low level of formal education, or cannot communicate in English (Noguera, 2003; Grant & Sleeter, 1996). Additionally, in some cultures, parents' great respect for the teacher as expert may result in their hesitancy to interfere in the educational process or to question educational decisions. However, this seeming lack of involvement may result in teachers missing out on the home resources they might discover if they took the time to understand their students and their culture more deeply.

Educators should reduce the gap between the way they teach and the ways students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds learn. Studies show that teachers can learn from students' cultural experiences and understand that there is more than one way to teach reading and writing (Heath, 1983; González, Andrade, Civil & Moll, 2001). The "funds of knowledge" or "wealth of knowledge" that exist in the homes of these children should be explored, understood, and incorporated into the curriculum. This has the effect of positioning students in harmony with, rather than in conflict against, the education received in school, as they recognize that their culture is important and valuable. All these factors are considered by many educators as inevitable, irreversible and impossible to change; therefore, there is little effort to raise the academic experience of the students. Blaming the parents for the "disposition of the students" or a society that provides little to poor children, emerge as justifications for not taking appropriate responsibility as educators (Noguera, 2003).

Jim Cummins, in *Empowering Minority Students* (1989), states that collaboration between teachers and parents will not be fruitful unless power structures are challenged. Parents should rise from a subordinate position to become full participants in an educational process which incorporates their cultural and linguistic perspectives. Society often assumes that student failure can be attributed to the lack of English spoken by parents. Researchers of language socialization theory investigate which of the traditions of migrant families are functional (or not) in schools and other institutions which decide whether children will succeed (Zentella, 2005). Unfortunately, educators rarely reflect on the impact that excluding the voices of parents in educational decisions has on their students, or how this may affect students' access to enrichment programs, (e.g. academic programs in their native language, scholarships, etc.).

Methodology

Our collaboration began after Sonia, an elementary school teacher, graduated from the Master's Program. Sonia's interest in creating a classroom environment and a curriculum that integrated the funds of knowledge of the students brought us together. We often met for coffee to talk about how to best involve parents in the education of their children, and how to create opportunities to meet with them. These conversations further developed when we co-taught a graduate class. We took this opportunity to collaborate and design a stream of assignments that served as the focus of this study.

Participants

The participants in this study were students in a graduate education course. The class met three weekends (Friday and Saturday) for a 3 credit-course. There were 12 students enrolled, all teachers at different school districts, within a radius of 50 miles. The cultural makeup was 40% Latina/o and 60% Anglo Saxon.

Pedagogical Intervention

Three assignments were designed, representing our commitment to encourage students in the graduate course to develop new ways of thinking about community, home and school relations, more in tune with local cultures and values. Moreover, we wanted educators to experience the power of project-based learning that is contextualized within the local community. We wanted to affirm the experiences and lived histories

of the students, their families and the communities in which they live, and give voice to family personal histories—often dismissed or ignored in the schools because they do not match the stories of the dominant culture. The following three assignments reflect our attempt to create bridges between the local community, family and school.

Neighborhood walk. Our purpose was to increase educators' ability to familiarize themselves with the neighborhood and context of the students. Basing our mapping and grading of the neighborhood on the City Works (Steinberg & Stephen, 1999) curriculum, we designed the assignment (See Appendix).

Community resources. This assignment required educators to identify and contact at least four community resources that support parent(s) and families. Our intention was that the community resource would serve as a basis for understanding and developing the sort of questions that would be meaningful, and would contextualize the lives of the students in specific communities. After discussing resources available and researching the Internet, students shared a list. Afterwards, we brainstormed questions that would get to the heart of the assignment.

Home visit: The goals for this assignment were to learn about the ways of knowing that exist in a child's home and how this knowledge is transmitted to the child. We also wanted to discover the expectations of the parents or guardians related to schools and teachers, as well as academic goals for their children. Questions were brainstormed together but teachers were responsible for selecting the ones that would best help them develop the conversation. Furthermore, we encouraged teachers to conduct a more open-ended visit, thus allowing parents to add their own questions and extend the conversation. Below are sample questions suggested to educators prior to the interview:

Tell me about your family.

What are your favorite things about your child?

What are elements about your child that make you proud?

From your perspective, what are your child's academic strengths?

What are your child's academic challenges?

Tell me about the social/emotional aspects of your child?

What are the most important things to you regarding your child's education?

What do you need from me, the teacher?

What goals should we make together with your child for this school year?

Teaching Pedagogy

Our class began as culture circles (Freire, 1970), conducted with chairs arranged in a circular configuration. This setting provided opportunities for all participants to be active contributors to the conversation. We empowered the teachers to ask their own questions and seek their own answers, and challenged them to understand the world's complexities. We believe that for educators to gain critical understanding of the socio-economic and political structures impacting schooling and students' lives, dialogue needs to be provided.

The first step to encouraging thinking about this issue is demonstrated by an activity where students were tasked with examining the demographics of their school community and the community at large. These probing questions were given to guide their investigation.

What are the current issues surrounding the populations present in your school? (Possible interviews/questions- school administration, school district, local advocacy organizations, local newspaper)

How might these issues manifest themselves within the classroom families' lives? (Example- high unemployment rate, immigration issues, rural area with long commutes to/from school, language barriers, lack of community resources for diverse populations)

What organizations exist to offer assistance to your school community? What service(s) do they provide?

Who are the local advocates that exist that may partner with your school?

What other resources exist to benefit your students and classroom families, based on the needs you've identified?

Through this investigation, educators were able to broaden their scope of understanding for local community issues that impact their school families. Examining the issues led us to reflect upon our role as advocates for our students and their families. We must understand the factors beyond our classroom walls that may affect the space we create for our students. Knowing the community and the issues impacting our families can lead us to a greater understanding that enables us to advocate for our students.

Scaffolding educators through this "consciousness" not only means affording opportunities for dialogue, but it also means the creation of dialogical spaces within the classroom where their own experiences can be shared. Building trust and relationships translates into "hearing" teachers' concerns and questions. This is an important aspect of our

teaching, because developing a sense of closeness to others expressed through feelings of responsibility or of concern requires being able to look at the world from a less self-centered perspective (The Dalai Lama, 2001).

A central part of our teaching is for educators to perceive us as humans (hooks, 2003), as people who have lived these experiences, and to share the lessons learned. Before asking educators to conduct home visits, we recounted our first experiences visiting the homes of our students while working in public school and the opportunities these visits created. We shared how, before the school year started, we requested the class roster. One by one, we called each family and asked if there was a time we could come by for a visit and to meet their child, the new student. Most families were surprised by the request, but welcomed the meeting. Sonia shared how, after conducting home visits before the beginning of the school year, she brings all of the classroom families together for a large-scale family dinner. During the fall and spring times for parent-teacher conferences, she hosts the family dinner at the school. It is potluck style so everyone brings a dish to share. Students give presentations on their work in all the content areas and showcase their team projects for their families. Sonia pointed out that subsequently she was invited to Shabbats, *quinceañeras* (a Latina American ceremony for girls turning fifteen to mark the transition from childhood to young womanhood), soccer games and birthday parties. As she attended these family and community events, her relationship with her classroom families grew deeper and richer. To the families, being able to share experiences like a Saturday morning soccer game with her meant an investment in their child. Sonia pointed out how she saw the more meaningful connections the families had to their extended family, their places of worship, and to their community from participating in these events.

The chance to “break bread” with each other allows for a deeper connection between the teacher, parents and students. To demonstrate this, we invited parents reflecting the diversity of the community to a round table dinner. Everyone brought food to share, and as we began dialoguing, we realized that there was much to learn about their communities and expectations. Parents from Bosnia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Mexico were represented.

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Data Collection

Data for this study were collected throughout the semester and included documentation from the three main assignments: community

resources, neighborhood map, and home visit. Other data included relevant teachers' participation and discussions in class activities. The analysis focuses on the "meaning" educators made as a result of their working through all of the assignments. Specifically, the data were reviewed to identify evidence of teachers' understanding of the importance of creating and developing community-home-school relations. As we read the data, two analytical categories were evident: listening to parents, and seeing the communities by walking and talking.

Results

Listening to Parents

Students shared how, until now, they had tried to educate parents from non-dominant cultures by imposing on them "right" (translated as "dominant culture") ways of being. Students mentioned that they had forgotten the values and beliefs held by families. One student wrote

I learned that I can't educate people, because they are already educated. Now I recognize that my work is to be a bridge that connects the two parts [home and school]" (José, translated written reflection).

Another important connection made by the students was that relationships between teachers and their students' communities are bi-directional. They wrote that learning about their students was based on "learning where they come from" (Cassandra, final paper). Moreover, instead of placing themselves at the center, they placed the "community" at the center because they understood that asking families to learn about school meant that they also, as teachers, had to learn about their community.

Jamie studied Andre, a boy from Mexico who was bi-literate but was demonstrating a lack of motivation; he was not turning in his homework. In her analysis, Jamie confessed that she had selected Andre because he was frequently missing school, and this affected his classwork. She acknowledged that when she first contacted the parents, she was a little scared because she truly believed they did not care. When visiting the home, she learned that Andre was missing school because he felt he wasn't doing well, his English test scores were low, and "he was now 18 years old." The mom shared her concern, and mentioned that she made him go to school every day. After this initial home visit, Jamie started to communicate on a regular basis with the family in order to help strengthen the mother's expectations for her son.

I really thought this family did not care, but after getting to know the family, I realized how much they really care.” (Home Visit)

Joanna visited Ivan’s mother in hopes of obtaining a fuller view of Ivan’s personal life. The mother shared that she only received a fourth grade education before she joined the workforce in Mexico; however, she emphatically said, “I am doing my best to provide for my family alongside my husband. I decided to stop working in order to dedicate my full attention to my children.” Joanna was impressed to learn that Ivan’s mother pushed him to read even when he doesn’t feel like it. The mother uses the home computer (which Ivan loves) as an incentive to get him to read. As Joanna reflected on her visit, she understood that, in spite of the family’s low economic status, they had a wealth of educational resources to offer Ivan: he has a home computer, a relatively good quantity of reading material in the house, and a nurturing/stress-free home environment. She further reflected that engaging in home visits was an altogether enlightening process. Joanna commented on the amount of time and effort it takes to get to know a student beyond the façade presented on a daily basis and in the confines of a classroom. However, she said that getting to know Ivan at this deep level has given her a sincere desire to see him succeed.

Seeing the Communities by Walking and Talking

Students commented about their hesitation about the neighborhood walk. They didn’t see the purpose of it. However, through the many class discussions, and after the actual walk, one student acknowledged:

This was an extremely powerful walkthrough of what many students encounter on a daily basis to and from school. The label placed on them [students] may in fact represent the type of education they will receive. The article [Mehan, 1996] and the fieldtrip have a positive correlation in respect of how students from a poor side of town are more likely to [have] labels and stereotypes placed on them ... As a future educator it is imperative to inform myself of the many cultures and communities in my classroom. (Emily, written reflection)

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Students not only visited the community but went back to their schools and reflected on how to bring community resources to parents. Many reviewed their strategic plans and began conversations with their colleagues and principals. Yesenia talked about inviting different groups to an open house to host informal sessions in both English and Spanish to inform parents about their services.

After visiting organizations that work with teens, students brainstormed on having a “Teen Pregnancy Night” and inviting organizations to talk to families. Students in the group shared this idea, eliciting response from other class members. They discussed how some parents may oppose such an event, but they felt strongly about finding a way to address this issue since it was a serious problem in the area.

Conclusions

From collaboration comes change, the idea that teaching is not just the “traditional view of teaching” but it involves more than lesson planning and class management. Our intention was to broaden teacher roles and responsibilities. We modeled what we asked them to do, working collaboratively to make change. We wanted them to learn that communities have people who are committed to change and that in order to learn about them, they needed to engage in dialoguing.

As faculty members, we understood the importance of utilizing nontraditional pedagogical practices as an avenue to engage teachers to understand the importance of community-home-school relations. We also believed that by engaging teachers in nontraditional pedagogical practices, we were affording the non-dominant populations an opportunity to articulate themselves as members of the community. Lisa succinctly expresses this in her assignment:

My personal philosophy towards parental involvement has changed drastically since I took this class. These changes have come from within me and my beliefs and thoughts toward empowering families. To me parental involvement has come to mean I have a responsibility to empower my parents with the knowledge of how to help their children be successful in schools... I must form relationships with my families... I need to understand my families better so I can understand how they are contributing to their children’s education and how to work with them as a partner.

Lisa’s comments embody the heart of this research project—the understanding that educational success, especially for students from non-dominant cultures, may depend on the optimization of relationships among communities, schools, and families. When the strengths and resources of all of them are tapped into and welcomed, schools can become places of possibility, learning, and hope for a better future. When everyone feels their contributions are important, an atmosphere is created in which all students are more likely to thrive and succeed. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process by initiating the processes that bring all these resources together.

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Appendix Grading your neighborhood

Name: _____

Date: _____

In order to get a clear picture of the a neighborhood and what it has to offer, it will be important to put together as much information as possible about the good points and the bad points of the neighborhood. In this exercise think about your own neighborhood or another neighborhood you know well and grade its features. Using the report card below, add any other features you think are important for a neighborhood to have.

Afterwards discuss your report card with 3 other students. Do you all have similar ideas about what constitutes a good or a bad neighborhood? What features on the report card do you think are most important and why? Do you think that people’s ideas about what they value in their neighborhoods change as they get older? What other features did you add to your report card lists and why?

What makes a neighborhood a good place to live? Grade your neighborhood on the following features, then add other features you consider important and grade those.

Refer to the grading chart below. Give reasons for your grade.

Housing: Are houses and apartment buildings, clean, safe and in good repair?

Grade _____

Public transportation: How accessible is the neighborhood by bus?

Grade _____

Stores: Are there food stores with good selection of foods at affordable prices?

Grade _____

Are there clothing stores with a selection of clothes at affordable prices?

Grade _____

Is the school within walking distance? How is the school graded in the district?

Grade _____

Recreational facilities: Are there playgrounds, fields, basketball/tennis courts, other sports facilities?

Grade _____

Is there an indoor gym that residents have access to?

Grade _____

Open space and parks: Are there trees, yards, public spaces in which to walk and sit?

Grade _____

Parking: Is there enough parking for people's cars? Is there off-street parking?

Grade _____

Noise: Is it peaceful and quiet, relatively undisturbed by traffic or street noise?

Grade _____

Safety: Is the neighborhood safe to walk around in, even after dark?

Grade _____

Other:

Grade _____

Other:

Grade _____

Other:

Grade _____

Tour the child's neighborhood:

If you were giving someone a tour of your neighborhood, how would you describe it to them? Think about the kinds of people who live there as well as any other special characteristics you think are important. Also think about the places and/or buildings that are an important part of your neighborhood. Answer the questions below and then proceed to the mapping exercise.

Name and location of neighborhood:

Characteristics of neighborhood:

Five important places or buildings:

Other:

Use the space on this page to draft a rough map of the neighborhood. Then use your own paper to produce a finished version. Your map does not need to be drawn perfectly, but it should be as detailed and accurate as possible. Show the streets, residences or dwellings, and any other buildings or places you listed on your neighborhood tour sheet. Make symbols to represent buildings and objects on your neighborhood map, labeling its buildings, streets, and significant features.
