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Community, Home, and School Partnerships: A Critical Issue in Bilingual Education

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**Community, Home, and School Partnerships: A Critical Issue
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How can we help educators realize the wealth and relevancy that culturally and linguistically diverse families and students bring into the schools? 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, however, 84% of teachers are white (Feistritz, 2011), despite serving 74 million children in the United States (defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as those under 18 years of age), of which 59% are White; 19% Hispanic, 15%; Black, 4%; Asian, and 3% Other ethnicities, (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006). Because our nation's teaching force is predominantly white, female, and middle-class, the values, perceptions, and decisions of these teachers will vary greatly from those of this increasingly diverse student population.

Several studies (Rist, 2000; Ferguson, 1998) have shown that low teacher expectations may arise from teachers' personal biases or prejudices against students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., language use, SES, or behavior). These low expectations affect the academic opportunities provided to students. Furthermore, studies have shown that culturally and linguistically diverse students have more difficulties in developing their academic skills, and this reality is associated with the differential negative treatment received (August & Hakuta, 1997; Chamot,

1992; Rumbaut, 1990). For example, a teacher may assume that because the student comes from a Spanish-speaking family, the student may have little access to print, thus the student is assigned to the low-performance reading group where the student is not challenged. Even though this behavior may be of good intention, the quality of instruction received has not changed, which likely influences student performance and view of himself as a learner.

Currently, one of the biggest challenges facing educators in the United States is educators' understanding of the wealth of culture possessed by immigrant, migrant or other language minority children. More specifically, educators must understand the importance that families give to education, the literacy they possess, and the linguistic wealth that exists in non-English speaking homes. Finally, educators must understand that the economic, social and cultural differences are not obstacles for students to succeed; on the contrary, they are assets for educational success.

The Impact of Dismissing Students' Culture

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. Although academic and institutional requirements have changed, as JoBeth Allen discussed in the book entitled *Literacy in the Welcoming Classroom* (2010), expectations of parents regarding the education of children has remained the same over the past 20 years. Traditionally in the United States, immigrant students, or non-native speakers of English, have not received the same treatment as students from the dominant culture (Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins, 1988). It is well documented that the cultural practices of their native countries or their homes are often

undervalued or simply ignored by educators. For example, one practice that is often undervalued is storytelling. Often students are taught to use decontextualized language to write or tell stories by connecting with more familiar stories or with events that have occurred. Differently the traditions of storytelling of culturally and linguistically diverse students are highly contextualized by adding or embellishing the story or joint storytelling with others (Mehan, 1996; Heath, 1993). The mismatch between these narrative styles maybe reflected in the life of the classroom or in the way students are assessed.

Unfortunately, many educators equate the lack of “hands on” parental involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse parents with a lack of interest in the education of their children. This notion is linked to parents’ infrequent visits or infrequent communication with teachers about their children's progress. Studies show that the limited involvement of the families of culturally and linguistically diverse students is due to several factors (Mercado, 2005; Mercado & Moll 1997; Quezada, Diaz & Sanchez, 2003; Valdés, 1996). First, in Latino cultures, the teacher is respected and admired by the parents, and any interference from parents may seem rude or disrespectful, moreover, parents may not realize that active involvement in the school is expected (Roybal and García, 2004; Tinkler, 2002; Valdés, 1996; Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). Second, there often exists a language barrier. Most U.S. teachers are monolingual, and many schools lack the critical language support services that language minority families require. Parents are unable to communicate when attending school events. They often feel as if their hands are tied when attending meetings and/or social events (Orellana, 2009; Tinkler, 2002; Delgado-Gaitán, 1991). Third, many of the family members of these students have received no formal education (only 30.3 % of

Hispanics age 25 and over have a high school diploma)(U.S. Census, 2011), which generally makes them feel less capable when talking with teachers (Zentella 2005). Finally, parents often view schools with suspicion as they perceive that their children are being pulled away from the familiarity of the homes to the structure and demands of schools (Hong, 2011).

Unfortunately, although many educators admit wanting to involve parents in the educational experiences of students, formal or informal school-based practices and policies may mean that parents are excluded and treated contemptuously because they are low income, may lack a formal education, or struggle to effectively communicate in English (Noguera, 2003; Grant & Sleeter, 1996). Teachers and school personnel must be encouraged to seek out, understand and incorporate the knowledge, interest, and experiences that culturally and linguistically diverse students and their parents bring with them to school every day (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lapp et. al. 1996; McCaleb, 1997; Valdés, 1996).

How Schools and Educators can Capitalize on Differing Cultures

Educators should seek to bridge the gap between the worlds of school and home for their language minority students. Studies show that teachers can learn a tremendous amount from students' home cultural experiences and utilize these understandings to effectively support students in the classroom (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 sought out, explored, and incorporated into the curriculum González, Moll & Amanti, (2005). Understanding these funds may better position teachers

to resist deficit beliefs about language and culture (Banks, 1981; Nieto, 2000) and position students and their families as acting in concert with, rather than in conflict with, the educational culture of the school.

Many of these deficit-based beliefs about language minority families are perceived to be inevitable, irreversible and impossible to change; therefore, there is little effort to raise the academic achievement of these 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 responsibilities as educators (Noguera, 2003).

To know and honor different ways of being is essential for strong home, school and community relationships. The daily cultural and linguistic socialization among immigrant and language minority families should be better understood and valued in schools. If not, students will clearly perceive a contradiction between the values of school and home, leading to resistance that ultimately hinders learning and long term school achievement (Kailin, 1994; Sleeter, 1992; Veléz-Ibañez & -Greenberg, 1992).

The Role of Preparation Programs in Integrating Students' Cultural Wealth

Teacher education programs must provide multiple and sustained opportunities for their pre-service teachers to learn about the literacy and informal educational practices of their language minority students. Cochran (1993) argues pre-service teachers must explore the context in which they work and understand the communities with an insider's view. Teacher education programs need to find opportunities for educators to be apprentices of their students' cultures, to better understand the values and practices carried out in families and communities, and

develop a pedagogy that honors and respects those cultures. The knowledge presented in university courses should be explored in the community contexts of local schools, so pre-service teachers are aware of the importance of integrating knowledge of home cultural practices into their pedagogies (Murrell & Diez, 1997). Project-based learning such as home visits, community event participation provide opportunities for students to learn about the background of culturally and linguistically diverse students, while using their findings as resources. Huerta- Macias and Quintero (1993) and McCaleb (1994) have explored what schools can do to bring in parent's life experience, families histories, and cultural knowledge. Incorporating these experiences, as well as the knowledge gained from the home visits, community and event participation into the classroom curriculum and practice, helps teachers become more reflective of children's families and communities, and demonstrates to the students that their beliefs, values and customs are respected.

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