

Parent Involvement and ELLs

Yanet Cardoza
EDCI 6460 UNT
Dr. Mary Harris
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Parental Involvement for Parents of Hispanic English Language Learners

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 emphasizes a strong relationship between schools and parents in support of high student achievement. According to the Department of Education (2004), this emphasis is based on research that shows that “when schools collaborate with parents to help their children learn and when parents participate in school activities and decision-making about their children’s education, children achieve at higher levels.” The United States has grown in ethnic and language diversity. Parents who are not native English speakers find it challenging to be involved in school. This policy brief describes the current context of the nation’s diversity, shares some of the barriers that Hispanic parents often face in becoming more involved in their children’s school lives, and discusses ways schools can facilitate parental involvement.

Descriptive Context

English Language Learners (ELL’s) are a rapidly growing population in Texas. Currently, there are 817,671 English Language Learners; 17% of the total students, with 90% of them being Spanish speakers. 440,540 of those students are served in bilingual programs, and 307,827 students are served in ESL programs. The state of Texas has over 120 languages represented, with the prominent languages being the following (not including Spanish): 15,493 Vietnamese (1.90%), 4,791 Arabic (0.59%), 3,985 Urdu (0.49%), and 2,906 Korean (0.36%) (Lewisville ISD, 2010). English Language Learners have been the fastest growing population in the United States, where in 1998-1999, we had about 2 million ELL’s in public schools and in 2004-2005 we had 5 million students. In the United States, 10.5% of the total students are English Language Learners (Arias & Morillo, 2008).

On March 24, 2011, the Texas Education Agency announced that “for the first time in modern Texas history, Hispanic students now make up a majority of those enrolled in Texas public schools” (TEA, 2011). Statistics from the 2010-2011 school year data show that there are 2,480,000 Hispanic students enrolled in Texas public schools, 50.2 percent of the total enrollment (TEA, 2011).

Research has shown that parental involvement can be a major component increasing student academic achievement. The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) states that “when parents are involved, student achieve more, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnic/racial background, or the parents’ education level” (PTA, 2011).

The PTA values and acknowledges the importance of culture and diversity in parental involvement. The association published a diversity and inclusion policy in an effort to promote equity in parental involvement. The policy states the following recommendations:

Parent Involvement and ELLs

- Openly assess beliefs and practices to assure inclusiveness and guard against discrimination;
- Make every effort to create a PTA board and membership that is inclusive and reflective of its community;
- Encourage that all PTA activities at the school be planned by a committee which is representative of the population
- Foster programs and practices that eliminate bias, prejudice and misunderstanding within their communities;
- Become acquainted with the leaders of the many diverse groups in the community and collaborate with them to increase parent, family and community involvement;
- Educate its leaders and members to the needs, cultural beliefs, traditions and family structures of the population they serve; and
- Propose change wherever discriminatory practices are perceived (PTA, 2011).

As a result of the growing Hispanic and English Language Learner population in the state of Texas, it is important to recognize the issues related to parental involvement in the group of Hispanic English Language Learners.

Vocabulary Terms

Parent: Section 9101(32) of the ESEA defines a parent as the “legal guardian or other person standing in loco parentis (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare).” (Department of Education, 2004)

Parental Involvement: Section 9101(32) of the ESEA defines parental involvement as “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities including:

- Assisting their child’s learning;
- Being actively involved in their child’s education at school;
- Serving as full partners in their child’s education and being included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and
- The carrying out of other activities such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA.” (Department of Education, 2004).

Limited English Proficient (LEP): The Texas Education Code (TEC, Section 29.052) defines a student of limited English proficiency as “a student whose primary language is other than English and whose English language skills are such that the student has difficulty performing ordinary class work in English.” (Texas Education Code, 2011)

English Language Learner (ELL): “A student whose native language is one other than English. This term is often used synonymously with Limited English Proficient” (TEA, 2010). The current trend has been to refer to students whose native language is not English, as English Language Learners (ELL) rather than a limited English proficient student.

Parent Involvement and ELLs

Hispanic: The Texas Education Agency (2010) definition for Hispanic as “a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.”

Immigrant: TEA (2010) uses the following to define immigrant. “Under Title III of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, the terms ‘immigrant children and youth’ are defined as, individuals who are aged 3 through 21, were not born in any state, and have not been attending one or more schools in any one or more states for more than three full academic years.

Characteristics of Hispanic Parents

It is important to acknowledge some of the common characteristics seen in the backgrounds of families who are not native English speakers. According to the United States Census 2000, almost 50% of ELL elementary students have parents with less than a high school education, and about 25% have parents who might not have made it even to 9th grade (as cited in Arias & Morillo, 2008). Not only might their educational backgrounds differ from the norm for parents who are native to the United States, their cultural backgrounds may also differ, and their views on parental involvement may not be similar. For example, in many of the Hispanic and Latino cultures, teachers and educators are highly respected, and confronting a teacher on an issue by a parent is considered disrespectful. Often times, in Hispanic families, although family support at home is very strong, extending that support to the educational setting by becoming involved in school is not common (Inger, 1992). In Hispanic families, it is often seen that the woman’s responsibility is to take care of the home, husband, and family leaving no time for anything else. Also, many Hispanic families are native Spanish speakers and not fluent in English, especially if they are members of the first generations in this country (Finders & Lewis, 1994). Additionally, Chrispeel & Rivero (2001) found that many Hispanic parents seem to have a “lack of knowledge of the U.S. system, a mismatch between parents’ concept of parent involvement and the school’s expectations, and a concept that the teaching of academic skills is the responsibility of the school.” This represents a huge cultural difference between the Hispanic population and the U.S. school system.

The 2000 census identified the following facts about Hispanics (as cited in Trickey, 2002):

- 35.3 million Hispanics were counted in the United States.
- 58.5 percent of Hispanics were Mexicans.
- Salvadorians are the largest group of Hispanics from Central America
- More than 75 percent of Hispanics live in the western or southern parts of the U.S.
- More than 60 percent of Puerto-Ricans live in the northeast part of the U.S.

Although most people might not be aware of some of the traditional or common characteristics of Hispanic families, it is important to acknowledge what makes them unique and different from other cultures.

Research in Parental Involvement Programs

The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is part of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. They have several publications on research regarding disadvantaged youth as a way to inform educational policy and practice. Several highlights of their research publications will be shared here.

The Harvard Family Research Project (2006) has found the following benefits when family involvement is promoted successfully at the elementary school level:

- Students in K-3 have higher task orientation and work quality.
- Students perform better in school when they have parents that assist with homework.
- Students are more likely to participate in class, ask for help on assignments, and are better able to monitor their own work.

The Chicago Child-Parent Centers sought to improve parental involvement in low-income families with students in Pre-K through third grade. The strategies they implemented were home visits, volunteering in the classroom, attending educational workshops, and parent-teacher meetings. The results of the program showed that the low-income families who participated in the program had kindergartners who were better prepared for school and less likely to be referred to special education. The students of participating families also had higher reading scores in 8th grade, had lower rates of grade retention, and were less likely to drop out of high school (HFRP, 2006).

The Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) has a 9-week course for parents that have been beneficial for the Latino youth in California. Participation in the program has been associated with reducing high school dropout rates and increased college participation. HFRP reported that in the general population about 62% of students will enroll in college. However, 80% of the Latino youth who had parents participate in the PIQE program enrolled in college (HFRP, 2006).

A study conducted by Chrispeel and Rivero (2001) also found benefits in student success when immigrant parents participated in the PIQUE program. Chrispeel and Rivero conducted a study with 198 immigrant parents to evaluate the effect of an intervention program called Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQUE). After participating in the program, the following changes were observed in families: “ a) more parent-initiated communication; b) more positive support and interaction with their children; c) more engagement in teaching activities at home, such as reading and homework help; and d) more advocacy for their child to see records and press for an understanding about academic progress.”

Jeynes (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 41 studies to evaluate the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement in urban elementary school children. The results of the meta-analysis indicated that parental involvement is also strongly associated with higher levels of achievement for students of racial minority and for both boys and girls. Jeynes' meta-analysis also found that programs that encouraged parental support in school had a positive relationship with achievement for the students at urban schools (2005).

Challenges that Hispanic ELL Parents Face in Being Involved in School

Many research publications have common themes in regards to the challenges that Hispanic ELL parents face in being involved in their child's education. The common themes are discussed in the following section.

The Deficit Perspective: The cultural and language differences of Hispanic ELL parents are seen as deficits. Educators may perceive these parents as lacking support for the school and knowledge about the importance of education (Arias & Morillo, 2008; Inger 1992). Teachers and school administrators have a perception that "those who need to come, don't come" (Finders & Lewis, 1994). This conveys the perception that parents need to come to school for remediation of their parenting skills.

Language and Cultural Barriers: The primary language of school meetings is English. Many Hispanic ELL parents are not fluent in English, which hinders their ability to participate in school based decision-making committees, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. Additionally, it is common in the Hispanic and immigrant culture to separate school and home responsibilities (Inger, 1992; Panferov, 2010). The American school system often misreads this as uncaring and lack in interest for their child's education; this creates a cycle of misperceptions between the parents and the school staff. Also, many times school communications are only sent in English, erecting a language barrier between home and school (Inger, 1992).

Logistical Barriers: At some schools, parent-teacher conferences, school meetings, and special school-home programs are held during the day while Hispanic parents are working; making it difficult for parents to attend the meetings. It is common that lack of time can be a logistical barrier for many Hispanic families in being more involved in school. This is especially for newly immigrated families who often work long hours, have both parents working, or have single parent homes (Tinkler, 2002; Floyd, 1998). Additionally, baby-sitting issues can create a problem for stay-at-home moms that want to volunteer in the classroom and many families often only have on car at home that is often used by the working parent (Floyd, 1998).

Recommendations for Facilitating Parental Involvement for Hispanic ELL Parents

Chrispeels (1996) identifies five kinds of parental involvement that are important in conceptualizing parent-community-school partnership

1. Allow for two-way communication between parents and school.
2. Parents and teachers support the child, the family, and the school.
3. Teachers and parents learn about each other and how to work together.
4. Share the responsibilities and roles in teaching between parents and school.
5. Collaborate in decision making and advocacy for students and education.

When these five areas are emphasized and fostered by the parents and the teachers at school, parental involvement can be improved.

Arias and Morillo (2008) make recommendations for improving ELL parental involvement. First, school staff must create a "welcoming environment." This can be accomplished through

Parent Involvement and ELLs

always having positive attitudes when greeting and meeting with parents, facilitating communication by having an interpreter and translator available, and allowing for physical space that will accommodate the parents and their families.

Arias and Morillo (2008) also cite six areas that schools could emphasize in order to help families become more involved in their child's education and informed on how they can help their children from Epstein (1992). These six areas include:

1. Teaching parenting and childrearing skills
2. Allowing for two-way communication with families about school and student progress.
3. Recruiting families to be school volunteers and attend school programs.
4. Showing parents how to be more involved in their child's education and how to help their child with homework
5. Involving parents in school decision making committees
6. Collaborating with community agencies

Finders and Lewis (1994) gathered recommendations directly from parents for getting more parents involved in school. The parents suggested that school staff communicate how parents can help their children and that they show parents how to and encourage their being assertive advocates for their children's education.

Related Issues

It is important to acknowledge that English Language Learners have struggled in gaining equity in education. People have advocated for educational programs that target the needs of ELLs. This can be seen in the legislative history concerning bilingual education.

1974 Lau v. Nichols

Class action suit was brought about by Chinese students who were native Chinese speakers in California. Their concern was that they were not receiving any educational support. The Supreme Court ruled that schools have a legal obligation to ensure educational opportunity for English Language Learners; however, the court did not mandate any specific program or instructional design for English Language Learners.

1975 Aspira of New York, Inc. v. Board of Education

An advocacy group filed suit on behalf of Hispanic students in New York City. Their concern was that the Hispanic students were unable to participate in regular classes because of their lack in English language proficiency. The group advocated for Spanish curriculum. The U.S. district court agreed and developed procedures for identifying students who needed Spanish language programs in place of English language instructional program.

Texas Education Code

Currently, the following is stated in Section 29.051 of the Texas Education Code regarding the education of ELLs. "English is the basic language of this state. Public schools are responsible for providing a full opportunity for all students to become competent in speaking, reading, writing, and comprehending the English language... this subchapter provides for the establishment of bilingual education and special language programs in the public schools and

provides supplemental financial assistance to help school districts meet the extra costs of the programs.”

Summary

Both the state and federal level have recognized the importance of meeting the instructional needs of English Language Learners. Hispanic ELLs is a student population that has become a growing presence in our educational system. This year, Hispanic students make up a majority of students enrolled in Texas public schools. Statistics from the 2010-2011 school year show that Hispanic students make up 50.2 percent of the total enrollment in Texas public schools (TEA, 2011). Historically, there has been conflict and much disagreement about how best to meet the needs of English Language Learners. However, instructional programs are not the only thing that affects education. As we have seen in this policy brief, parental involvement is also another component; one in which many barriers exist that prevent their involvement. Research has shown an association between increased parental involvement and increased student achievement. Some of the research has shown this statistically significance to be especially true in ethnic minorities. Also, studies such as the one by Chrispeel & Rivero (2001) have shown that working with parents on how to become more involved actually increases the quality and quantity of parental involvement and communication between the parents and the school. When schools understand the challenges and barriers that prevent Hispanic ELL parents from becoming more involved, they can break through the barriers and create a better-connected school-home community as it is called for under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

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Parent Involvement and ELLs

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Parent Involvement and ELLs

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