Involving Hispanic Parents in their children's education

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Introduction

The involvement of Hispanic parents in their children's education and their collaboration with schools is essential to turn around the pattern of low academic achievement that has affected Hispanic students for several decades. Parental involvement[1] is a key factor in increasing emotional support of children, development of literacy, school attendance, teachers' confidence and parents' expertise in helping their children succeed academically.

In spite of efforts of all major education reforms over the past 15 years to stress the importance of parental involvement, most schools have not been successful in involving Spanish-speaking parents. As numbers of Hispanic students will continue to rise well into the 21st century, involving parents will become even a bigger challenge for teachers and administrators, if schools want to address the needs of an increasingly ethnically diverse school population.

The activities that schools carry out to promote parental involvement are not addressing the needs of all parents. For the most part, these activities are appealing to middle class parents, whose educational background, social status and financial resources strengthen their ability to help their children succeed in school. Hispanic parents feel alienated from schools and as a result, they have low attendance at parent meetings, tend to withdraw from participating in parent-teacher conferences and avoid communication with teachers and school administrators.

Schools have to take responsibility for the low level of participation of Spanish-speaking parents and for its consequences for children's academic achievement. In fact, research evidence points strongly to the correlation between school practices and parental involvement. This evidence suggests that parental involvement increases significantly when schools value the input of parents and are able to incorporate this input in the school curriculum; when schools initiate activities to show parents that they can help in children's homework in spite of language limitations; when schools sensitize teachers and administrators to reach out to parents and help them find in their own experiences and limited resources the tools they need to support their children's education.

Schools that want to increase parental involvement must be sensitive to the situation and experiences of many Spanish-speaking parents. Many of these parents are affected by a lack of fluency in English and by factors associated with poverty such as low level of education. These limitations influence the way they participate in schools and the ideas they have about their own ability to support their children's school achievement. Programs of parental involvement must

[1] The use of the term *Parental Involvemen*t in this paper is inclusive of any adult who has responsibilities for children's education on a daily basis.

address these limitations and should provide opportunities for parents to talk about what they experience, to reflect critically on those experiences, to validate the questions they have regarding schools and education, to gain more knowledge and information, and to find appropriate ways of collaboration and participation. To succeed, schools need working instruments to support the work of parent liaisons, teachers and administrators to implement strategies that will both help parents to get involved and will help teachers and administrators to become aware of Hispanic parents' needs.

This paper elaborates on the current situation of many Hispanic students, the importance of parental involvement to improve their academic performance, the barriers that parents find along the way, and the lessons learned from successful parental involvement programs around the country. The analysis of research evidence and successful programs underlines the need to develop a culturally sensitive approach to parental involvement that builds on parents' experiences and that provides help to schools to implement effective programs.

The Hispanic revolution in the school population

The most important change in the school population over the next two decades is the continued increase in both the number and proportion of traditionally disadvantaged students. The population under 18 is expected to increase by about 4 by 2020, as the number of children in this age group rises to 66.4 million in 2020. During this time, the number of white students is expected to decline by about 27 percent and the number of Hispanics will nearly triple, increasing to 18.6 million in 2020. The student population of African American and other minorities is expected to increase at a much lower pace, to 10.5 million in 2020[2].

These demographic changes will significantly alter the ethnic makeup of classrooms as we know them today. For example, in 1988, about 70 percent of students in grades 1-12 were White. In 2020 only 49 percent are expected to be White. In 1988, Hispanics comprised about 11 percent of the student population and are expected to increase to 28 percent by 2020. This means that while about 7 in 10 children were White in 1988 , only about 1 in 2 will be in 2020; and while only 1 in 9 children was Hispanic in 1988, more than 1 in 4 children will be in 2020. Overall, the proportion of children whose primary language is other than English will double from about 4 percent in 1988 to about 8 percent in 2020. As numbers of Hispanic students continue to rise, teachers will have in their classrooms significantly more language minority students from disadvantaged communities.

Poverty and the Hispanic community

In 1996 poverty rate of Hispanics was 29.4 percent, the highest of all ethnic groups. Comparatively, the poverty rate among African Americans was 28.4 percent, for Asians and Pacific Islanders it was 14.5 percent and for non-Hispanic Whites the rate of poverty was 8.6

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[2] Natriello, G., McDill, E.L., Pallas, A.M. (Eds) (1986) *Schooling Disadvantaged Children*. New York: Teachers College Press.

percent[3]. Among children, it has been estimated that 20 percent of all children under 18 years of age live in families below the poverty line, which represents about 12.4 million children living in poverty in the United States. This affects primarily minority children. While poverty rate for White children was about 12%, for African American, the rate was about 46% and for Hispanic children the rate was about 40%. Although African American and Hispanics formed approximately one-quarter of the under-18 population in 1987, they represented about one-half of the children in poverty[4]. According to a 1995 report, the rates of poverty among African Americans and Hispanics have continued to increase, although slightly[5].

Every year, millions of Hispanic children are born into poverty. In 1990-91, for example, of the 5 million children who were foreign-born or born to Hispanic immigrants living in the United States, 38 percent, or 2 million, were poor[6]. In that same year, approximately 60 percent of immigrants to the United States originated in Mexico, Central American, the Caribbean and South America.

Poverty among Hispanics is particularly visible in large urban centers. For example, in Boston, income of Hispanic families is lower than all other groups. The average income for a Hispanic family in 1992[7] in Boston was $26,292, which is only 56 percent of the average income of White families. 34 percent of Hispanic families were living below poverty line.

The impact of poverty on academic achievement

The high correlation of poverty with poor educational achievement worries educators as they see that the situation of increasing number of Hispanic students will continue to deteriorate if current trends remain unchanged.

Hispanic children start elementary school with less preschool experience than White children and this gap has widened over time. Enrollment of White children in preschool education programs has increased since the 1970's by about 10 percent. In 1993, 38 percent of White children were enrolled in these programs compared to 17 percent of Hispanic children, and enrollment rates of Hispanics remain about the same since 1973[8].

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[3] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Current Population Reports P60-198.

[4] US Bureau of the Census, 1988c. Current Population Reports, P-60, Nº 161.

[5] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Poverty in the United States: 1995. Current Population Reports. P-60, Nº 16. Washington , DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996.

[6] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Statistical abstract of the United States: 1995. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995, pp. 11 and 15, Tables 8 and 14.

[7] U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992.

[8] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, October 1995 Current Population Surveys.

Gaps also exist in academic performance of Hispanic students as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Differences in reading, mathematics and science measured at age 9 persist throughout school years. For example in 1992, the average proficiency scores for Hispanic 13-year-olds was about two years behind their White peers. This was also the case in reading and even worse in science, where mean proficiency of Hispanic 13-year-olds was similar to that of 9-year-old white students. By the time these students reach their last year of high school the gap is too wide to be remedied.

Dropout rates for Hispanics also remain high. Counting all Hispanic aged 16 to 24, including those who have entered the United States with less than a 12th grade education and never enrolled in school, the dropout rate is about 30 percent. Among those who have enrolled in school in this country, the dropout rate is about 19.6 percent. This figure is the highest of the last decade and more than double the national rate. In comparative terms, African Americans have a dropout rate of about 12.1 percent and whites of about 8.6 percent[9]. A 1995 U.S. Department of Education study[10] has confirmed that language remains a key barrier to finishing school for large number of Hispanics. Regardless of where they were born, students who spoke English well were less likely to be dropouts than students who do not. The study found that students who speak Spanish at home but also speak English well, are as likely to remain in school as their Hispanic peers who only speak English at home.

The correlation between poverty and dropout rates has been well established. In July 1997 the National Center of Education Statistics reported that since 1972, students from low-income families have been consistently more likely to drop out than those from high and middle-income families. The same report claims that "young adults living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 percent of all family incomes were six times as likely as their peers from families in the 20 percent of the income distribution to drop out" and "eight times more likely to be out of school without high school certification[11]." In addition to school failure, some students have reported leaving school because of work-related reasons, forced in many cases by financial needs of the family. Youth, males and females, that work longer hours have been found more likely to drop out. This phenomenon tends to increase in situations where the economy does better, as it is easier to find a job. A broader picture, however, shows that dropouts have a lower chance of being employed than those who graduate from high school. In 1992, for example, more than one-half (54 percent) of recent Hispanic high school graduates not enrolled in college were employed, compared to less than one-third (29 percent) of recent Hispanic dropouts.

The situation of Hispanic students is causing increasing concern, not only among educators who see with alarm how this population grows and with it problems in academic achievement and dropout, but to the Hispanics themselves and the rest of society. The impact of high dropout rates is devastating to society. It has been calculated that for each student who drops out there is

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[9] Source: U.S. Census Bureau. National Center for Education Statistics. "Dropout Rates in the United States: 1995." (Released in May 1997).

[10] Source: U.S. Census Bureau. National Center for Education Statistics. "Dropout Rates in the United States: 1995." (Released in May 1997).

[11] "Dropout Rates in the United States: 1995. National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, July 1997, p.8.

a cost to society over a lifetime estimated at $200,000 in welfare benefits and lost tax revenues.[12] Equally important is the fact that the non completion of high school leaves young adults with no competitive skills to get a job in the labor market making difficult to break the cycle of poverty, which reproduces into the next generation. According to Dr. Walter Secada, director of the Hispanic Dropout Project (HDP), "an undereducated and under-skilled Hispanic workforce is harmful not only to Hispanics who drop out, but to the American economy and larger non-Hispanic population as well[13]."

The impact of culture on academic achievement

A deeper analysis of the situation reveals that low-income is not the only factor explaining high dropout rates. A comparison of dropout and income level across Whites, African American and Hispanics suggests that dropout rates may be due in part to factors other than income. It is a fact that in every ethnic group, dropout is lowest in youths living in high-income families and higher in low-income families. It has been demonstrated, for example, that students from White and African American high-income families have the same probability of dropping out of school and the same is true for Hispanics.

But when comparisons are made between lower income families across ethnic groups, differences emerge. Among low-income families, African Americans are more at risk than Whites to dropout and middle and lower-income Hispanic families are more likely to drop out than White and African American students of low-income levels. These findings support the conclusion that higher dropout rates experienced by Hispanics are also related to factors other than income.

Cultural values and attitudes towards education of working class Hispanic parents are also important factors influencing educational outcomes. There is plenty of research that shows that poor parents, although valuing education in general, have a less clear understanding of its specific benefits, having themselves experienced failure in schools. It is confusing to many parents the extent to which education will make a difference in their children's lives. And most importantly, there is a sense of marginalization from the dominant society and particularly from schools, which are viewed as institutions that mostly reflect the values and experiences of Anglo American culture.

The fact that parental beliefs, expectations, attitudes, knowledge and information about schools are influencing the way in which parents get involved in their children's education, has made some educators, researchers and policy makers pay attention to how parental involvement is being implemented in schools. For this reason, questions about what schools do, and can do to improve parental involvement have become central in the education debate.

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[12] Report released by the National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1986.

[13] Center for Educational Research, Hispanic Dropout Rate Becoming a National Crisis. U.W. at Madison, School of Education. 1995.

Involvement of Parents in schools

The evidence on the positive impact of parental involvement on educational outcomes[14] is solid. Research shows unequivocally that parent involvement has a positive effect on children's self esteem, self confidence to do well in school and cognitive development. Also studies show that teachers can do their work more effectively when they have the collaboration of parents, particularly those whose children are more at risk.

Several policy documents produced at the national, state and local level have taken up these findings and recommend that schools implement parental involvement programs. For example, A Nation At Risk, published by the National Commission on Education in 1983 had a strong impact on school restructuring efforts, where parental involvement became a key concern. This concern continues to be a priority in the current administration's Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

At the state level, research findings have influenced the development of policy and legal frameworks to achieve parental involvement. For example, the California Strategic Plan for Parental Involvement in Education was adopted in 1989 and was the first state plan in the country with a comprehensive policy and a state law mandating parent involvement in schools. The Plan outlines types of parental involvement that school districts should implement, such as the development of parenting skills, helping parents to help children at home, development of community outreach and support initiatives, implementation of good school-family communication practices, involving of parents in support roles in schools, and opening opportunities for parents as decision makers. In fact, policy recommendations have been put into practice in many school districts in California and in other states. The existence of parent or family liaisons in many schools and the implementation of regular activities such as parent meetings, open house events and teacher-parent conferences, are concrete examples of action taken by schools to facilitate parental participation.

In spring 1996, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collected data from a representative national sample of 810 public elementary schools with students from Kindergarten to grade 8 to determine which school activities encourage parental involvement, the amount of parent participation on those activities, and the extent to which parent input is considered in decision making related to school issues[15].

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[14] -Becher, R.M. (1984) "Parent Involvement: A review of research and principles of successful practice." National Institute of Education, Washington, DC. -Cummins, J. (1986). Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56, 18-36. -Delgado- Gaitán, Concha. (1990) Literacy for Empowerment: *The Role of parents in children's education*. New York: The Falmer Press. -Harvard Family Research Project (1995). *Raising Our Future: Families, Schools and Communities Joining Together.* Cambridge: Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Rich, D. (1985) *The forgotten factor in school success: The Family*. Washington, DC: Home and School Institute. -Scott-jones, D. (1980). "Relationships between family variables and school achievement in low-income black first graders." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the AERA.

[15] U.S. Department of Education, NCES. Survey on family and School Partnerships in Public Schools, K-8. FRSS58. 1996.

Ninety percent of schools reported having open houses or back-to-school nights and 92 percent had parent-teacher conferences. Also, 80 percent of schools reported having organized activities to display students' performance in sports, arts and science. Little variability was found among schools with different characteristics which shows that in most cases, these kinds of activities have been institutionalized as part of regular school functions.

A general finding was that parents are more attracted to participate in activities with a direct interaction with teachers, such as parent conferences, than those displaying students' performance. However, only 57 percent of schools reported a high attendance to parents-teachers conferences and only 49 percent reported high attendance to open houses or back- to- school nights, during the

1995-96 school year. Only about 33 percent of schools reported high attendance of parents to students' sport events and arts or science fairs.

A closer look to these data reveals how parental participation varies significantly across income-level. For example, regarding open houses, the survey found that 72 percent of low-poverty schools reported that most parents attended, 48 percent of schools with moderate poverty reported high attendance and only 28 percent of high-poverty schools reported high attendance. These findings were consistent with the percentage of minority students enrolled. Schools with a minority enrollment of less than 5 percent reported significantly higher levels of parental participation in all events compared to schools with an enrollment of 50 percent or higher of minority students.

The survey also found that parents are not included in school decision making processes. Only about 40 percent of the schools surveyed reported that parents are consulted in decision making regarding small decisions. The National Education Goals Report (1998) indicates that the level of parental involvement has not changed between 1993 and 1996[16].

There are very few studies of parent opinion about strategies schools utilize to get parents involved. A recent one was conducted in 1996 by the National Household Education Survey[17]. This study conducted telephone interviews with 20,792 parents of children in grades 1-12. Parents were asked how schools did in relation to seven different types of practices defined by Epstein and Salinas (1993)[18]. These are:

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[16] National Education Goals Panel. *The National Education goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners*. Washington DC: U.S. government Printing Office. 1998.

[17] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, spring 1996.

[18] Epstein, J.L. and Salinas, K.C. (1993). School and family partnerships: Questionnaires for teachers and parents in elementary and middle grades. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Center of Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning.

1. “letting parents know between report cards how their child is doing”;
2. “making them aware of chances to volunteer at the school”;
3. “improving parents understanding of parenting and child development”;
4. “helping families help children learn at home”;
5. “supporting families by collaborating with the community”
6. “to bring families needed resources” and;
7. “increase family participation in the community”.

Over 50% of the respondents said that their schools did very well regarding 1 and 2 above. For each of the other types of school practices to involve parents, the majority of parents interviewed said their schools were not doing a good job. The findings varied across school type. Parents whose children attended private and church related schools were more satisfied with school practices to involve parents than public school parents; and opinions were more favorable in public schools that were chosen than to those that were assigned.

It is striking to discover that nearly half of the parents in the study did not rank schools high in providing basic information about academic progress throughout the school year, and that over 60 percent said that schools do not do a good job in most of the other practices listed above. Of these practices, there are two that deserve special attention: “helping parents understand parenting and child development” and “helping them help children learn at home”, two areas with a strong influence on educational outcomes. The information gathered from school reports and from parent interviews suggests that schools are not doing enough to reach out to parents; and that minority low-income parents are the ones who participate the least.

An explanation for the lack of participation of minority parents, consistent with the research evidence reviewed in this paper, is that strategies and programs of parental involvement have been addressed to parents in general, and have elicited the response of middle class parents who are better prepared to respond to school demands and have no language barriers. In fact, most school initiatives to involve parents are well intentioned but fail to target the needs of working class parents, particularly of those with English language limitations, as many Hispanic parents have. Studies by Lareau[19] and Campos[20] discuss differences between types of parents and show that the family’s social location leads parents to construct different pathways to relate to the school, but that schools ask for very similar types of behavior from all parents, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural background.

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[19] Lareau, A. 1987. Social class differences in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of Education*, 60, 73-85.

[20] Campos, J. & Keatinge, R. 11984. The Carpintería Preschool Program: Title VII Second Year Evaluation Report. Washington, DC: Department of Education.

Issues of language, education background, and concepts of parents' roles in their children's education, for example, need to be at the forefront of a Hispanic parental involvement agenda, since their needs differ significantly from those of middle class parents. The recurring theme in many teachers and school administrators that less-educated parents do not want or cannot become involved must be challenged on the basis of solid evidence[21] that shows that they willing to collaborate if schools are culturally inclusive of minorities and sensitive to their needs and experiences.

Barriers to involvement of Hispanic parents

There are economic, educational and cultural barriers to parental involvement. The most predominant explanation discussed in the literature, grounded in research[22], as well as found in the common sense of teachers and school administrators, is related to socio-economic factors. Hard physical jobs, multiple jobs, and long hours of work are some factors that limit the time, energy and resources of parents to support children at home and attend school meetings.

Low levels of formal education of many Hispanic parents have also been reported as being an obstacle to improving their communication with schools. According to a 1987 study, over 56% of Hispanics were functionally illiterate[23]. In 1989, 40 percent of Hispanics between 25 and 34 years of age, which are the most likely to have school-aged children, had not completed four years of high school, and another 25 percent had graduated without skills. Only 11% in the same age bracket had completed four or more years of college, compared to 26 percent of non-Hispanics[24]. Data gathered in the city of Boston found that more than 47 percent of Hispanics over 25 years of age had not graduated from high school, compared to 33 percent of Blacks and 18 percent of Whites[25].

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[21] Becker, R.M.. & Epstein, J.L. 1982. Parent involvement: A Study of Teacher Practices. Elementary School Journal, 83, p. 85-102. Clark, R. 1983. *Family life and school achievement: Why poor black children succeed and fail?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Comer, J.P. 1980. School Power. New York: Free Press. Rubin, R.I., Olmsted, P.O., Szegda, M.J. Wetherby, M.J., & Williams, D.S. 1993. Long-term effect of parent education on follow through program participation. AERA Montreal. Epstein, J.L. 1996. Perspectives and previews on research and policy for school, family, and community partnerships. In S. Booth & J.F. Funn (Eds.), family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes? (Chapter 14) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

[22] Rivera, R. & Nieto, S. (Eds.) 1996. *The Education of Latino Students in Massachusetts: Issues, Research, and Policy Implications*. Stallworth, J.T., & Williams, D.L. 1982. A survey of parents regarding parent involvement in schools: Austin, TX. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Epstein, J.L. 1996. *Perspectives and previews on research and policy for school, family, and community partnerships*. In S. Booth and J.F. Dunn (Eds.) Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes? Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

[23] Levin, H.M. Accelerated schools for disadvantaged students. Educational Leadership, 44, 19 21. 1987.

[24] *Education Week*, October 25, 1989.

[25] U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992.

Another frequently found explanation is that parental participation is an alien concept among working class Hispanics. The experience of many of these parents in their country of origin is that there is a clear separation between parents and schools. Parents do not see themselves being responsible for supervising and having a say in what teachers are doing with their children in school. They see themselves as less educated than teachers and look up to them. In their experience, parents rely in teachers and administrators to decide what is in the best interest of their children. In addition to the above, language limitations prevent good communication of many Hispanic parents with teachers and administrators.
Awareness of the economic, educational and cultural barriers of parental involvement is useful to understand where Hispanic parents come from but has also left many teachers and administrators feeling hopeless and skeptical about what schools can do to raise family income, improve parents' level of education or change their cultural values about education. Even more troublesome is the fact that the analysis of these barriers has often justified a deficit approach that explains the lack of parental participation on the basis of the things that parents "do not have". The deficit approach puts the blame on parents for not participating and often avoids the question of what schools can do to reach out to parents.

Schools as barriers of parental involvement

Institutional barriers, from within the education system, have been acknowledged for years. For example, at the district level, over ten years ago, former Boston Public Schools' Superintendent Laval S. Wilson in his Community Support Report of 1987 said that "the school system has failed to effectively reach out and build networks and linkages to the community and our parents" and that "parent involvement historically has not been a priority in the Boston Public Schools." The report identifies three major reasons for low level of parental participation: diverse views of teachers and administrators on the role of parents; the lack of a commitment of the schools to promote parental involvement; and the poor communication between schools and parents. Rivera and Nieto (1994)[26], who studied specifically the perspective of Boston Hispanic parents argue that the analysis of Superintendent Wilson continues to prevail because the situation in public schools regarding parental involvement has not changed significantly. Many Hispanic parents feel that the school system is confusing and difficult to understand and that the information given to them in booklets and other material is often lengthy, and written in unclear language for working class parents, even when is translated into Spanish.

At the school level, there are too many cases where not enough is being done to work together with Hispanic parents. A 1996 survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals[27] inquired about the importance that principals give to the education of children and families who do not speak English. Of the 802 principals surveyed, only 20 percent said that this issue was "very important", 32 percent said it was "important" and 48 percent said it was "less important". At the same time the study found that 65 percent of the same principals

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26 ibid Rivera & Nieto. 1994.

27 News release from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA, Mar. 22 1996, p.3.

thought that it was “very important” to find ways to help parents become more committed and involved with their children’s education. However, if school authorities are not giving too much attention to the education of least English proficiency students, not much work from schools should be expected to promote the involvement of Spanish-speaking parents.

A body of research[28] reports on common barriers attributed to the “so called” school culture. For example, many teachers do not communicate with parents because they do not speak Spanish or because they think it is not worthwhile given that they do not have the necessary skills to help their children in their school tasks. Teachers also misinterpret parents reluctancy to contact them and think that Hispanic parents are not concerned about their children’s education.

When parents are called in to schools to talk about their children’s problems, they are frequently left with a negative feeling about their parenting skills, which makes them reluctant to come back. When parents are invited to schools to attend meetings, there is a lack of adequate mechanisms to engage them effectively in a collaborative relationship with teachers, beyond specific incidents. In schools with a mixed socioeconomic spectrum of students, less educated parents are reluctant to attend meetings and when they do, they tend to remain quiet. In these cases, meetings tend to be dominated by middle class parents and teachers tend to pay more attention to English-speaking parents with higher levels of education. As a consequence, many Hispanic parents perceive teachers and principals as being distant and impersonal and often think they are perceived as incapable and are treated with a lack of respect.

Regarding school curricula, there are very few positive and constructive references to the experiences of Hispanic children that are used in everyday classroom activities and there are very few educational materials culturally appropriate to Hispanic students. It is difficult to find materials where children can find pictures with which they can identify. Often, knowledge and experience of Hispanic parents and their contribution to American society is misrepresented by negative stereotypes which alienate students and parents from feeling a part of the school culture.

Wolfe et al. define this type of culture as “the norms, values, and beliefs of those involved in the education process[29]” and we may add, the human practices and educational curricula emerging from those norms, values and beliefs. For example, the curriculum, which is an important component of the school culture is a very concrete expression of the cultural values of teachers and other school officials. For this reason most curricula are focused on experiences of the European- American society, ignoring or misrepresenting the experiences of minority cultures[30].

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[28] Mulhern, M, Rodriguez-Brown, T. Shanahan, T. Family Literacy of r Language Minority Families: Issues for Program Implementation. NCBE Program Information Guide Series, Number 17, Summer 1994. Rosado, L.A. Promoting Partnerships with minority parents: a revolution in today’s restructuring efforts. The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority students, v.14, pp. 241-254, Winter 1994.

[29] Wolfe, M.P., Howell, G.L. & Charland, J.A. (1989). Energizing the school community. The *Clearing House for the Contemporary Educator in Middle and Secondary School*, 63(1), 29-32.

[30] Aronowitz, S., & Giroux, H. 1985. *Education under siege: The conservative liberal, and radical debate over schooling*. MA” Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc. Banks, J.A., & Banks, C.A. (Eds.) 1989. Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives. MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Schools can make a difference

Removing school culture barriers is a necessity if we want Hispanic parents to collaborate with schools. Changing the views and practices of school personnel is an effective way of achieving this goal. Evidence in this direction has been provided by Epstein's years of research on parental participation[31] which shows that school practices to involve parents are strong predictors of parental involvement. Epstein's study in Baltimore Chapter I schools[32], carried out in the mid 1980's found that parents got more involved when schools had a clear policy of parental involvement and gave them more and better information and valued their collaboration.

In this same study, many teachers said they thought parents were not interested in getting involved. Parents, on the other hand, needed more active expression of interest from teachers, and more information about what children do in school to clarify in which ways they could collaborate. The study concluded that teachers' practices, more than parents' level of education, income or marital status, made a bigger difference in whether or not parents and teachers could work together.

Epstein's findings have been corroborated by the work carried out by Comer[33] in inner city schools in New Haven with African American and Hispanic parents where parent participation was increased by improving school climate and involving parents in decision making. Work conducted by Delgado-Gaitán with Mexican American parents in the Portillo School District in California is also consistent with these findings. During three years (1986-88), the Portillo project examined how parents involved themselves in their elementary school children's education, particularly in the acquisition of literacy. The study concluded that the successful participation of parents "is dependent on the ability of the schools to incorporate the parents and the culture of the home as an integral part of the school instruction plan.[34]"

Lessons learned from successful programs

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[31] Epstein, J.L. (1986). Parents' reactions to teacher practices of parent involvement. The *Elementary School Journal*, 86, 277-294. Dauber, S.L., & Epstein, J.L. (1989). Parents' attitudes and practices of involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. Epstein, J.L. (1996) Perspectives and previews on research and policy for school, family, and community partnerships. In S. Booth and J.F. Dunn (Eds.), *Family-school links: How do they affect educational outcomes?* Chapter 14. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

[32] This was an action research project in eight Chapter I school in Baltimore to increase parental involvement in children's education. The project was funded by The Fund for Educational Excellence in Baltimore, which makes small grants directly to local schools to help teachers to improve parents' involvement.

[33] Comer, J.P. 1986. Parent Participation in the Schools. *Phi Delta Kappan.* February 1986.

[34] Delgado-Gaitán, C. (1990). *Literacy for Empowerment: The Role of parents in children's Education*. New York: The Falmer Press.

Important lessons learned from successful programs that have involved minority parents are consistent with research which points at the correlation of school practices and parental involvement.

The first lesson is that parental involvement should be a comprehensive strategy in schools involving not only parents and the community, but also students, teachers and school administrators, to impact the whole school culture. It is not enough to have a few teachers willing to work with parents when the principal is not involved. Neither is it sufficient to leave the responsibility to relate to Hispanic parents only to the Spanish speaking teachers.

Comer's School Development Program developed in the 1960's to collaborate with New Haven's School District, is a good example of a success in increasing parental participation on the basis of a comprehensive strategy. This program obtained positive results, including raising test scores in schools that had the lowest academic achievement and poor attendance. The program was also successful in improving school climate which had been characterized by serious problems among and between students, staff and parents[35]. This comprehensive strategy materialized in the integration of parents in the reform management team and by establishing a Parent Participation Program that brought parents closer to the classrooms and helped teachers and school administrators to break through cultural stereotypes and stigmatization. On the impact of the program on parents Comer has said that "many of the parents in our program were energized by their participation and returned to school to finish their own education. Many were then able to leave welfare and take jobs for which they would not have had the confidence or the credentials before their participation in the program[36]."

Another important lesson is that successful programs have as their initial focus a recognition and acceptance of parents' experiences and views of problems in schools. Jackson & Bruce[37] evaluated the Support Groups Program implemented at Bronx High Schools in the mid 1980's. The evaluators concluded that the high interest of Hispanic parents in joining the support groups was due to the fact that the initial focus was on their needs and concerns, not on learning more about the school programs, nor on emphasizing any failure on the part of their children. The support groups were led by parent-counselors who were responsible for recruiting the parents, arranging weekly meetings and following up. It was key to the success of the program that parent leaders became familiar with the resources, communication networks and decision making processes which impact on their children's education, both within the school and in the community. Again, as in New Haven, it was found that the program worked at best when the schools were involved as a whole, including principals and teachers.

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[35] Comer, J.P. 1988. A Brief History and Summary of the School Development Program. Yale Child Study Center, New Haven CT.

[36] Comer, J.P. 1988. A Brief History and Summary of the School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center, New Haven, CT. p.4, 5.

[37] Jackson, B.L. & Cooper, B.S. 1989. What Role for Parents in Urban High Schools: The New York Experience. Paper presented at the AERA annual meeting, San Francisco.

A third important lesson is that programs should be perceived by parents as learning opportunities to become better persons and enrich their views on education. Project FLAME[38] (Family Literacy: Learning, Bettering, Educating) provides literacy training and support for limited English proficient Hispanic parents so that they can have a positive influence in their children's literacy and academic achievement. The project was funded by OBEMLA, the University of Illinois at Chicago and a private foundation. It has been implemented in elementary schools serving mostly Hispanics from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Central America. The project has combined sessions in Spanish to discuss the experiences of parents as teachers, with sessions in English to discuss parents as learners. These sessions also have the goal of improving parents' English as a second language. The key of the success of the program has been the combination of sharing parents' experiences and gaining new useful and relevant information.

Another important lesson learned is that successful programs employ a methodological approach of working with parents consistent with a multicultural view of education; one that provides opportunities for parents to share and contribute to the school curriculum. Successful programs encourage the active participation of parents to make them feel comfortable and relaxed about who they are. The experience of the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE[39]) is a good example of this working style consistent with a multicultural educational approach. PIQE is a non-profit organization based in San Diego, California, which was established in 1987 to work with local school districts to empower low-income parents to support their children's education and improve parent-school communication and collaboration. PIQE's training workshops are carried out within agreements with schools and have good turn out and a completion rate of 70 percent. Training workshops have as their objective connecting parents' experiences with their children's education and identifying collaborative practices to ensure collaboration with the school. The training themes are determined after consultation with parents. Sessions are participatory and problem-posing is the pedagogical technique used to design and provide workshop experiences that are generated by parents. Parents reflect critically on common experiences leading to conceptualization of the causes of problems and then to action. Through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and action, parents come to a better understanding of what they can do to work together with schools more effectively.

Available materials to support school programs of Parental Involvement

These lessons from successful programs must be embedded in the educational curricula that schools use to support their work promoting parental involvement. However, the materials that are currently available for schools are far from expressing what successful programs have learned and are not appropriate to encourage Hispanic parents to increase their involvement in

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38 Mulhern, M., Rodriguez-Brown, F.V. & Shanahan, T. Family Literacy for Language Minority Families: Issues for Progr

39 Ochoa, A.M, Mardirosian, V. Investing in the Future of Youth: Parent Training. *The journal of Educational Issue of Language Minority Students*. V.16. Summer 1996. Boise State University.

their children's education. The following review of a sample of available materials illustrates their inadequacy.

Active Parenting[40] and Steps[41] are two curricula commercially distributed in the United States, focused on the development of parental skills and deal with topics such as Understanding your Child, Making Children Responsible, Winning Cooperation, Listening and Talking to your Child, Understanding Beliefs and Feelings, Active Parenting in a Democratic Society. These programs are addressed to a broad audience of parents assuming that all parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, are confronted with the same situations. Parents' experiences are portraits in a vacuum and cultural and class related issues that have a strong presence in the lives of Hispanic parents (and other minorities) are not taken into account.

For example, one of the videos in one of these programs[42], shows an African American mother helping her elementary school girl with homework on writing. The problem posed by the video is that the mother tries to impose her own writing style to her daughter constraining her expression of ideas and writing style. The experience of this African American mother does not relate in any way to the experience of most low-income minority women, and certainly not to the experience of most Hispanic women who do not have the educational background in reading and writing, let alone in english, to help their children with homework. The lack of literacy skills of parents and their fear to reveal to their children that they feel inadequate to help them with homework are real issues that form part of the parenting experiences of many Spanish-speaking parents. Also, the materials rely heavily on the passing of information provided by specialists which may be appropriate and useful to middle class parents, but does not help parents from other backgrounds cope with other types of problems. Also using this knowledge requires reading and writing skills that many Hispanics parents do not have.

The problems that Hispanic parents have participating in schools, i.e. communicating with teachers, attending teacher-parent conferences and school meetings, are not addressed by these curricula. This gives the impression that these problems are not part of parents' experiences. This may be true only for those parents who feel more comfortable in their relation with schools, due to their education background and other variables discussed in this paper.

There are other parenting programs available to schools that offer workshops to parents. For example, Families First[43] in the Boston area offers affordable workshops on different topics, i.e. "Developmentally Appropriate Expectations," "Love and Limits: Positive Approaches to Discipline". These workshops are run by specialists that present the topics, passing information to help parents meet their challenges. Although the workshop format and the direct contact of the

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[40] Active Parenting. 1993. Atlanta: Active parenting Publishers.

[41] STEPS. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, 1990.

[42] Active Parenting, video 1.

[43] *Families First* is a non profit which mandate is to provide education and support to parents of all backgrounds and life circumstances so that they may raise children who will develop into healthy, productive and caring members of their communities. The organization is based in Cambridge, MA.

specialists with the audience may allow more room to take into account different kinds of parenting contexts, these programs are not designed to address the experiences of specific groups of parents, including native Spanish speakers.

Other materials are more focused on parental involvement in schools. For example, The Right Question project developed in Cambridge MA, organizes workshops to provide information to parents about the school system and the functioning of schools, and is intended to empower parents to demand quality services from teachers and school administrators. The program is geared to a broad audience and is not targeted to Hispanic parents' needs. There are no materials in this program that reflect specifically on the experiences of Hispanic parents. Another example is Noteworthy, achieving excellence, a parents guide to decision making, developed by the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL), a non-profit funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Education Research and Improvement. This material has 60 pages of lengthy information on several topics that are organized in the form of a course syllabus. The topics are addressed to parents in general, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural context. Therefore, situations that are most relevant to Hispanic parents are not taken up by the material. There is a Spanish version[44] which was literally translated from English. The language used, in English and Spanish, is complex and requires of good literacy skills to understand it which raises the question of why these materials were translated in the first place. They do not become accessible to low-income Hispanic parents because they are in Spanish, and, on the other hand, it is likely that more educated Hispanic parents have no difficulties in reading them in English.

Other materials available also follow the syllabus format. For example, *Home-School-Community Relations*[45] developed and published by The National Community Education Association presents a series of topics and provides background information, instruction suggestions and a bibliography for each topic. These kinds of materials are not targeted to the experiences of Hispanic parents. *A Teachers Manual for parent and Community Involvement*[46] developed by the same organization, is a useful contribution to support the role of teachers in parental involvement but, as the authors acknowledge, "the materials in this manual have been collected, adapted, condensed, or developed over the past five years for use in graduate classes and units in school-community relations, community education, educational partnerships, and family and community involvement[47]." The materials are not designed to be used by Hispanic parents.

There are also some information sheets on parental issues and schooling, that have been translated to Spanish by the U.S. Department of Education and other organizations such as the

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[44] *Notable, un manual para padres sobre cómo hacer decisiones. Alcanzar la Excelencia*.. 1993. Aurora, CO: McREL

[45] Decker, L.E. Mott, C.S. (1997, reprint edition) Home-School-Community Relations. Fairfax, VA: National Community Education Publication Series.

[46] Decker, L.E., Gregg, G.A., Decker, V. *Teachers Manual for Parent and Community Involvement.* Fairfax, VA: National Community Education Association.

[47] In Overview paragraph.

Literacy Program of the University of Illinois at Chicago. These materials could be used to support programs that work with a Spanish speaking population but do not constitute a curriculum in itself and usually provide expert-based information, and do not deal with real situations relevant to this specific group.

In conclusion there is no available curriculum of parental involvement targeted to Hispanic low-income parents to support the work of schools in carrying out effective parental involvement programs. The existing materials[48] are usually written in professional language, with lengthy content-based paragraphs, that appeal more to a well educated audience with a good background in English reading and writing. Another limitation is that they are frequently written from the perspective of professionals and academics that share predominantly eurocentered views on parenting. These views tend to embrace a deficit model, that puts the blame on minority parents for lacking the right background and knowledge to do the right things. Parental issues and parent-school relations are usually presented in a vacuum, not giving enough attention to the socioeconomic and cultural context in which Hispanic parents live and where are they coming from when relating to schools.

A Curriculum Targeted to Hispanic parents

A curriculum targeted to Hispanic parents is a missing and necessary resource to support efforts of parent liaisons, teachers and administrators in schools with high concentration of Hispanic parents, as well as to support District-based initiatives to work with groups of Hispanic parents scattered in different schools.

Parents' experiences and not expert knowledge should be the focus of the curriculum. An experience-based curriculum will illustrate the most common and relevant situations of low-income Hispanic parents to open up learning opportunities. These situations should make the context clear and address problems associated to poverty, level of education of parents, views and ideas of schools and language deficiencies. The discussion of these factors and the way in which they influence their involvement in schools, will broaden parents' understanding of the barriers of parental involvement and will identify ways to remove them. Useful and practical information should also be provided by the curriculum to support parents search for understanding and action. A curriculum of parental involvement should also be instrumental to improve the understanding of schools of the participation of Hispanic parents.

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[48] Materials reviewed are part of:
-*Active parenting Today.* 1993, Atlanta: Active Publishers, Inc.
-*Achieving Excellence*. 1990. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL).
-*STEPS, a parenting education program.* Circle. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, AGS.
-*Home-School-Community Relations*. By L.E.Decker. 1994. Fairfax, VA: National Community Education Publication Series
-*Teacher's Manual for Parent and Community Involvement*. L.E. Decker, G.A. Gregg, & V.A. Decker. Fairfax, VA: National Community Education Association.

Goals and Objectives of the Curriculum

The goal of the curriculum should be two-fold. First, it should provide opportunities to Hispanic parents to discuss and find solutions to overcome barriers of parental involvement on the basis of their own experiences, and at the same time, it should provide schools with opportunities to revise these barriers and introduce changes to facilitate the involvement of Hispanic parents.

The objectives of the curriculum, as supported by evidence presented in this paper, should be to:

a) Identify and remove barriers of parental involvement, at home and at school to improve academic achievement of Hispanic students;

b) Improve the school curriculum with parents' experiences, views, and contributions;

c) Provide learning opportunities for Hispanic parents to gain knowledge and information on the functioning of schools and on needs and problems affecting their parental roles in relation to their children's education;

d) Support parent liaisons, teachers and school administrators to understand the point of view of Hispanic parents and work more effectively with them in programs of parental involvement.

Summary of Culturally Appropriate Parental Involvement Curriculum

The proposed curriculum consists of a series of short videos, a simulation game and a Facilitator's Guide. The videos will present common experiences and situations of Hispanic parents related to key factors that influence their involvement in their children's education, at school and at home. The videos will feature Hispanic parents and children presenting these situations, and highlighting the most common issues attached to them. The videos will stimulate the viewers to discuss their own experiences and ways to improve their collaboration with their children's education. The videos can also be used to sensitize teachers, school administrators and other parents in the experiences and perspectives of Hispanic parents.

The videos will be accompanied by a Facilitator's Guide to provide a methodological orientation and background information to parent liaisons, teachers or other individuals that may use the curriculum with groups of parents. The Guide will include a Parents' Section with background information for parents to take home after training sessions are completed. This information will be presented in easy-to-read form, with illustrations, in simple language and in Spanish.

Each video may be used separately, depending on the specific needs of the school. The following is a list of themes for the videos.

Videos

Series I: School experiences

1. **Enrollment of children in the Parental Information Center**
   The purpose of this video is to reflect on parents' experiences with PIC's to increase their knowledge and understanding of school enrollment procedures. Fears and parent questions, testing and test results, and placement will be discussed.

2. **What is Bilingual Education?**
   This video will open a discussion on parents' understanding of Bilingual Education; it will illustrate fears and expectations and pose common questions that parents have. This video will provide elements to discuss bilingual education as an integrated part of the school program, and not as a separate program.

3. **Communicating with teachers**
   The purpose of this video is to discuss parents' experiences with teachers, to identify the main barriers for communication, and fears that parents and teachers have. Discussion will provide opportunities to define effective communication strategies.

4. **Participation of parents in class work**
   The purpose of this video is to discuss parents' collaboration with homework and identify ways in which parents feel comfortable helping children out, both at home and at school. The video will open up a discussion on ways in which parents (and the information they provide) can be included in classroom lessons.

5. What is Special Education?

This video will stimulate a discussion on the understandings that parents have of special education, assessment procedures and placement in special education. Ways in which parents can collaborate in supporting special education needs will also be discussed.

6. Attending school meetings

The purpose of this video is to stimulate a discussion of parents' common experiences attending meetings at school and the factors that facilitate or inhibit their participation at the meetings.

7. Attending a teacher-parent conference

This video will open a discussion of parents' fears and expectations regarding teacher-parent conferences, and will encourage parents to identify the questions and pieces of information that would help them to make good use of these conferences. The discussion will include the role of teachers in these conferences.

8. Collaboration with school

The purpose of this video is to outline different forms of involvement in schools , i.e. homework and other learning activities in the home, classroom activities, collaboration with teachers, organization of school events. The video will focus on the impact of parental involvement and student's educational outcomes.

Series II: Home experiences

1. Helping with homework

The purpose of this video is to discuss ways in which parents can supervise and help children with homework. The video will stimulate a discussion of common barriers that parents experience when they are confronted with helping children with homework.

2. Helping children to develop literacy skills

This video will stimulate a discussion on the experiences that parents have regarding reading and writing with their children. The video will open a discussion of parent limitations as well as possibilities to help their children to develop basic literacy skills by promoting reading at home.

3. Watching TV

The purpose of this video is to discuss how much TV should children be allowed to watch on a daily basis and what are some ways of keeping TV watching under control.

4. Learning at home

This video will discuss learning opportunities in everyday situations that parents can use to enhance their children's education. For example, conversations at the dinner table, cooking activities, water consumption in the home, watering plants.

5. Sending children to school every day

This video will discuss reasons for allowing children to skip school. This video will stimulate a discussion on what parents can do to minimize the number of times children are allowed to stay home, and to recognize the importance of sending children to school every day.

6. Discipline

The purpose of this video is to identify and discuss the most common challenges that parents face in setting norms and following up on them. For example, norms regarding homework, watching TV, helping out at home.

7. **Expectations of children's performance**
The video will be used to discuss parents' common expectations of their children to analyze correlations between parents' expectations and children's behavior and school performance.

ESL and Technology Components

Each parent discussion session will also provide opportunities to develop English as a Second Language skills. Part of each workshop will be dedicated to vocabulary development and will provide support for Spanish-speaking parents to effectively communicate with school personnel in a variety of situations. This content-based ESL approach has been proven effective in many adult education settings.

Use of computers will be introduced in the workshops as an integral part of the learning and discussion process. Parents will have opportunities to learn basic computer skills in order to more effectively assist their children, to communicate with the school, or to enhance their performance in the work place. A special web site will be set up with resources for parents and teachers.

Simulation game

The curriculum will include one board game to address parents' fears and expectations of schools. The game will stimulate parents to share memories and experiences of their school days. The purpose of this game is to make parents aware of the possibility of passing their own fears on to their children, and to raise parents' expectations of what children can achieve in school.

Parent training in collaboration with the school

The proposed Parental Involvement curriculum should not be implemented in isolation. Its effectiveness requires the full endorsement by the school. Teachers and administrators, not only parent liaisons, should be involved in the implementation of the curriculum and orientation sessions. Training for school personnel should accompany its implementation.