

Overcoming Language and Cultural Barriers in School:  
Helping Hispanic Students Acquire Success in Elementary School

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Table of Contents

..... 1

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....2**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS .....3**

**ABSTRACT .....4**

**CHAPTER 1.....5**

    INTRODUCTION.....5

    STATEMENT OF PROBLEM .....6

    PURPOSE STATEMENT.....7

    RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....7

    THEORETICAL RATIONALE .....7

    ASSUMPTIONS.....8

    BACKGROUND AND NEED .....8

**CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE..... 10**

    INTRODUCTION..... 10

    HISTORICAL CONTEXT..... 10

    REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS LITERATURE ..... 12

*Teaching Approach* ..... 12

*American Attitude towards Educating Second Language Students*..... 18

*Cultural Connection to Hispanic Education*..... 20

    STATISTICS ..... 22

    SPECIAL COLLECTIONS..... 27

    INTERVIEW WITH AN EXPERT ..... 28

**CHAPTER 3 METHOD..... 32**

    SAMPLE AND SITE ..... 32

    ACCESS AND PERMISSIONS ..... 32

    DATA GATHERING STRATEGIES..... 33

    DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH..... 34

    ETHICAL STANDARDS ..... 34

**CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS ..... 35**

    DESCRIPTION OF SITE, INDIVIDUALS, DATA..... 35

    ANALYSIS OF THEMES ..... 35

**CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION..... 37**

    HOW PRESENT STUDY COMPARES TO PREVIOUS RESEARCH..... 37

    SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS..... 37

    LIMITATIONS/GAPS IN THE LITERATURE..... 39

    IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH..... 40

    OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LITERATURE ..... 40

    A PROPOSED MODEL..... 42

**REFERENCES..... 44**

## Abstract

Research shows that Hispanic second language students are not as successful as their English-speaking peers in school. The problem is in part due to several factors: curriculum deliverance in a foreign language, cultural differences, and family/school disconnect. Current census reports reveal that Hispanic populations in the United States, and therefore within public schools, are on the rise. With the passing of the 2002 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind, mainstream classroom curriculum instruction is now primarily taught in English. Without honoring the many languages and cultures that California students bring to the classroom, the disconnect between school and home deepens. This study followed qualitative design research using the interview format to research ways to more fully integrate Hispanic students and their families into the public school system. Teachers and administrators served as participants in data collection. Results indicated that honoring Hispanic culture within the curriculum and broadening the definition of parent participation, Hispanic students and families feel more connected to the educational process.

## Chapter 1

### **Introduction**

Each fall, millions of children enter our elementary schools across the United States with the desire to learn and broaden their educational horizons. For many children, educational gains are further enhanced through support received from home. Parents provide necessary scaffolding to increase academic gains in the areas of reading, math, science, and even friendship. But for some students, language and culture become barriers for the level of support offered by their family. Students with parents whom are active within the school community experience a greater degree of educational support, which often translates into school success. Unfortunately, the opposite is true as well.

While teaching elementary school in Sonoma County, I worked with a colleague that personally took it upon herself to reach out to each Hispanic family, respond to their personal family needs, and in essence draw them into the school system. She spent countless hours of her own time reaching out, ensuring family/school connectivity and ultimately, student success.

Upon moving to the east coast, I discovered that many Hispanic families desired to be a part of their child's education, but felt a certain level of disconnect from the school system. Participation greatly increased when meetings were translated into Spanish, but this wasn't possible all the time. After many conversations with a colleague, it was decided that something must be done, even if it was on a small scale. A little research uncovered a local community support agency that offered assistance on many different levels. For some families, they provided support through a library check-out

system which included educational games, toys, and books. For other families, they provided help locating healthcare through low cost medical clinics. Additionally, English classes were also offered many times throughout the year. After careful planning with this agency and my esteemed colleague, I enthusiastically opened the doors of my classroom after school hours one evening, to reach out to these families. During this evening, a general overview of the school year was presented, including specific dates and curricular expectations. As well, a basic reading lesson was modeled and translated to demonstrate the manner in which the students were being taught. And finally, parents were encouraged to ask questions regarding their own specific needs: help with homework, educational supplies, English classes, healthcare, etc.

The results were amazing; standing room only in my classroom. For years to come, those families came back to me when they were in need. I was touched by their willingness to reach out for help and moved to start thinking about how we could continue this kind of support. How could we expand this support to an even greater level? How could we reach out to families that want to support their child, but are limited in their own abilities due to language and cultural barriers?

### **Statement of Problem**

Hispanic families within the American school system are not fully participating in their child's education due to language and cultural barriers, and therefore missing out on the opportunity to help their child succeed. When their English-speaking counterparts incur difficulties, their parents are knowledgeable about the system and are therefore able to help their child work through the challenge; neither language nor culture is an inhibiting

factor. Many Hispanic families are at a disadvantage and often must rely on the goodness of the system to come to their defense.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to research ways to more completely integrate Hispanic families into the school system with the hope of increasing student academic success. Through a feeling of being connected, families can better provide encouragement and educational support to their own child. It is also my hope that by establishing a feeling of connectedness, more families will be drawn into the school community thereby receiving the tools needed to help their child succeed. With the success of these students may come more families that are willing to trust the system and reach out for assistance.

### **Research Questions**

What are the most effective ways of reaching out to the Hispanic community so that they may become more a part of their child's educational process and success? To what extent do we hope that Hispanic families will bring their culture with them to school and to what extent do we require that they assimilate into the ways of the school system? To what extent do educators need to connect with Hispanic communities in a way that will assist student success in school?

### **Theoretical Rationale**

Community engagement theory is the theoretical rationale behind this study that provides that there is a need for collaboration between education and the greater community at large. In my research, I am looking for collaboration between the elementary school and the local community. Though community engagement theory takes it as far as state, national, and global in terms of collaboration, I will focus on the local community. It also

provides that there is a “beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (The Carnegie Foundation, n.d., para.1).

### **Assumptions**

Hispanic families are not as involved in their child’s education because of language and cultural barriers. By providing help and support to Hispanic families, students would achieve a greater rate of educational success.

### **Background and Need**

In 1968, the federal government recognized a need to educate second language students entering into the American school system with the passage of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968; most specifically title VII. Through this act, the federal government would support bilingual programs through financial assistance for implementation, staffing, staff training, and program maintenance. The goal was to provide access to the curriculum for second language students who were of limited means. In 1998, California voters passed proposition 227 eliminating bilingual education in favor of immersion programs. Students were now to learn English by hearing it and practicing it all day. Teachers were mandated to instruct primarily in English (Crawford, 1999).

Rodriguez-Valls (2009) followed the work of two teachers who conducted research on Hispanic families becoming involved through building literacy in connection with local schools. Together they studied 29 fourth grade students in a South Los Angeles elementary school who were struggling to learn to read and write in part because they were required to learn using English only curricular programs. It was projected that by incorporating the students’ first language, as well as their home culture into the

curriculum, that literacy levels would be enhanced. Rodriguez-Valls' (2009) research demonstrated that students' academic growth was heightened when the teachers used two key factors: students' native tongue and references to students' native culture.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

### **Introduction**

In reviewing the research, several common themes have emerged; teaching approach being the first. From a model of “sink or swim” to that of bilingual education, the United States has wavered on the best way to instruct second language students in the public school system. Another theme is in American attitude towards second language students. Second language educational approaches change according to what is going on politically both within our country and abroad. And finally there emerges a theme of connecting a student’s culture to their education in order to promote success.

### **Historical Context**

In order to understand the disconnect that Hispanic families are experiencing within our school system, we must look back to the beginning of our country and the failure to adopt a national language by the founders, and the effect that this would then have on education. At our country’s inception, the United States struggled to be free from England, to stand firmly on her own feet, and to build a democratic government that left the choice of language up to the individual citizen (Crawford, 1999). But by the late 1600s, we aligned ourselves with England and promoted English as our country’s language. With the American Revolution, anti-British sentiments ran rampant, and once again the use of English was in question. By the late 1700s and early 1800s, English was back on the rise as immigrants from other European countries to the U.S. were in decline. Around 1830, German immigrants were once again prevalent, as were non-English enclaves. It was not until 1906 that Congress passed a law that required English-speaking skills as a part of the process of applying for naturalization. Furthermore, President Roosevelt

abolished the use of the German language with the United States entering into WWI (Crawford, 1999).

Educational practices followed these language trends with the U.S. oscillating between bilingual education and a “sink or swim” model. Crawford states, “By operating in English only, public schools weaned students from other tongues and opened a new world of opportunities” (Crawford, 1999, p.20). By the late 17<sup>th</sup> century many languages flourished within the United States. It is estimated that at least 18 tongues were spoken on Manhattan Island alone, not including Native American languages (Crawford, 1999).

The timeline for the United States’ educational practices is as follows: late 1800s bilingual education in decline in favor of nativism, early 1900s German families were willing to assimilate into society thereby promoting instruction in English, in the 1920s bands were lifted on bilingual education, but patriotism was high and this equated to much instruction in English, 1930s ESL methodology developed with a pull-out method in practice; bilingual education virtually eradicated, 1960s brought a large influx of Cubans to Florida and bilingual education began to be looked at and implemented once again, 1968 the federal government recognized the need to allocate extra money for students entering the country without English; the Bilingual Education Act established, 1980s brought the English-Only Movement, attacking bilingual education as a contributor to the decline of our country and promoting ethnic divisiveness, 1998 Californians passed proposition 227 ending bilingual education, 2002 Elementary and Secondary Education Act aka No Child Left Behind (Crawford, 1999), students must be tested and assessed in English after a three year window (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

It becomes apparent, that as a country, we are divided on where we stand in educating children of other languages and cultures. We pride ourselves on being the “Melting Pot”, but what do we do with that? Do we require that families assimilate into American culture, use English as their primary language, and hold students to high expectations that language acquisition will happen through immersion? Or do we look at the research that suggests that second language acquisition occurs more rapidly by further developing a child’s first language? Stephen Krashen, in his paper, “Why Bilingual Education?” states, “When schools provide children quality education in their primary language, they give them two things: knowledge and literacy” (Krashen, 1997, p.2).

As we look into ways to more thoroughly educate second language students, more specifically Hispanic students, it is important to note that in the last 60 years, there has been a dramatic shift in the countries that are immigrating to the United States. Census reports show that in the 1950s, the top 5 countries of origin immigrating to the United States were: Germany, Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Italy. The top 5 countries now immigrating to the U.S. are: Mexico, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, and China (Crawford, 1999). It is estimated that by the year 2050 the Hispanic population in the United States will reach 102 million, about one quarter of the total population (U.S. Government, 2004).

### **Review of the Previous Literature**

#### Teaching Approach

In 1968 the federal government recognized the need for extra money to be appropriated to the education of children entering into our country whose native language was not English. More specifically, Title VII, termed The Bilingual Education Act, was

established to provide financial resources to support innovative bilingual programs; the development of, staffing, staff training, and program maintenance (Crawford, 1999).

Rodriguez-Valls (2009) analyzed the work of two 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers in Southern California that sought to improve levels of literacy amongst their students by moving away from English only programs and involving the students' parents. Meaningful activities, through the use of reading cooperatives, were designed to contextualize the student's learning at school with their home cultural experiences. Rodriguez-Valls (2009) points out that proposition 227 was enacted to immerse second language students in English. While this may be the intention, Gandara is cited in this article as stating that "there is no empirical evidence that could show a substantial growth in the test scores of the first-generation of Latino students after Proposition 227" (Rodriguez-Valls, 2009, p.116). The teachers in this study interviewed parents to gain perspective on their hopes for their children and then created meaningful reading lessons that began with students reading in class with the teachers, followed by completing reading assignments that involved reading with their family at home, and culminated in a special evening event in which parent and child came to school to read. This reading cooperative design built trust between the families and the school, reinforced the student's cultural identity, and furthered the students' literacy growth.

Researchers Hayes, Rueda, and Chilton (2009) used descriptive and observational research to look at a Dual Proficiency program for educating students, whereby students are kept within the same group as they pass from one grade to the next in grades K-4. The authors point to John Dewey's position that there must be a home to school connection of learning and experiences, and go on to state that the most effective schools

recognize the role of families and communities within a child's learning journey.

Through scaffolding strategies that honored the students' home culture, instructional practices that included fostering the student's first language, and careful collaboration, Hayes and Rueda achieved greater student success in the classroom.

Callicott (2003) looks to a model of person-centered planning (PCP), as a way to support the individual needs of students in the school system through a process of involving families in curricular planning for their child. While this process is predominantly used for special needs students, i.e. autistic children, it was suggested that it might be a way to bridge the gap for second language students as well. The author makes a valid point by stating that families from different cultural backgrounds do not always share the same expectations in regards to teaching, learning, and parenting.

Callicott (2003) also points to Phillip Vassallo's argument that parent involvement is a predictor of student achievement. With that said, Callicott (2003) concludes that PCP is an effective way to increase family participation in education.

The authors, Scholmerich, Leyendecker, Citlak, Caspar, and Jakel (2008), look at testing of migrant and minority German children for placement in school. As pointed out by Mays (2008) in her article, "The Cultural Divide of Discourse: Understanding how English-language learners' primary discourse influences acquisition of literacy,"

Scholmerich et al. (2008) note that success on standardized tests requires a certain level of specialized knowledge embedded within the culture. Most notably is their finding that children that engaged in "language brokering", translating between the majority language and their home language, performed better on the administered tests, thereby forming an important connection between home and school. Scholmerich et al. (2008) conclude their

research by stating that while testing minority students is problematic, identifying at risk students and intervening on their behalf is necessary.

Krashen (2003), begins his article by stating, “Bilingual education has two goals: the acquisition of academic English and the development of the child’s heritage language for the benefits of bilingualism and biculturalism” (p.3). Krashen (2003) postulates that by teaching core subject matter to children in their primary language, the same information is more comprehensible when presented in English. Another way to look at this is to consider literacy. A child that learns to read in their primary language, transfers these skills and strategies more readily than a child that is asked to learn language and literacy simultaneously. Krashen (2003) goes on to say that true bilingual education introduces English instruction on the first day, and subject matter instruction is taught soon thereafter. Opponents to bilingual education often point to strong figures within the American culture that tout that they learned English without the support of bilingual programs in school. Krashen (2003) points to the fact that often these people received several years of schooling in their native country, in their native tongue, prior to entering into the school system in the United States. In conclusion, Krashen (2003) states that bilingual education continues to be falling out of favor even though theory and research both support it. He states that the solution is to get the correct information out to the general public, and allow voters to have greater information about the intentions of bilingual education.

Researchers Garcia and Jensen (2009) seek to urge the federal government to change policy in regards to educating young Hispanic children ranging in age from 3 to 8 years of age. Most notably in their article, “Early Educational Opportunities for Children

of Hispanic Origin,” Garcia and Jensen (2009) point to the fact that Hispanic students are not a homogenous group, and therefore enter into the American school system with a large variance of language development, as well as language use. Some Hispanic children learn to speak only Spanish at home while others learn Spanish then English, still others may learn only English. The researchers point to the 2000 United States census that reveals many parents of these students are limited in their own English. It appears that country of ancestry plays a part in how fully bilingual both students and parents are. Garcia and Jensen (2009) point to empirical evidence to suggest that interventions during the early educational years of Hispanic students are a “wise investment to improving learning opportunities and outcomes...” (Garcia and Jensen, 2009, p.6). The researchers go on to state that, “there are important associations between language development in Spanish and English and these develop certain cognitive features.” (p.7). Because of this importance, Garcia and Jensen (2009) feel that educational programs need to be explicit with both language and cultural integration.

Lleras and Rangel (2009) studied the impact of ability grouping in reading instruction for Hispanic students in grades K-3. As supported by several other researchers, Lleras and Rangel (2009) state that ability grouping is, “widely practiced in elementary schools across the United States” (Lleras and Rangel, 2009, p.281). The researchers used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study and compared the effects of students that were placed in low or high ability groups to students who were not grouped. Data from 22,000 students were analyzed, to include approximately 900 Hispanic students. Teachers were surveyed as to whether or not they grouped students for reading instruction and how many groups they maintained in their classroom.

Consideration was given to classrooms with higher portions of low socioeconomic students, low overall achieving student population and the amount of diversity. Lleras and Rangel's (2009) findings support previous research that suggest that students who attend schools with a significant population of racial minority students often experience a greater degree of ability grouping and often have lower achievement in reading. They found that Hispanic elementary school students learn substantially less than their peers when placed in a lower group for reading instruction especially in first and third grades. They conclude by postulating that, "Studies also indicate that African American and Hispanic students are much more likely to leave elementary school having lower achievement compared to white students..." (p.300).

A study performed by Gunn, Smolkowski, Biglan and Black (2002) looked at ways to curtail the rate of Hispanic dropouts. Most specifically the researchers sought to find ways to improve reading capabilities. "At a time when there is a pressing need to curb the disproportionately high dropout rate among older Hispanic students, it is critical to ensure that younger Hispanic students have the foundational skill they need to succeed in school- the ability to read" (Gunn et al., 2002, p.78). Two hundred fifty-six students, from three small Oregon communities, participated in receiving supplemental instruction in reading from trained instructional assistants over a two-year period. 62% of the participants were Hispanic. One year after the supplemental reading instruction ended, Gunn et al. (2002) found that despite performing behind their classmates, Hispanic students continued to make improvements in the following areas: word attack, oral reading fluency and passage comprehension, leading the researchers to conclude,

“...supplemental instruction can prevent reading failure among Hispanic and non-Hispanic children” (p.77).

#### American Attitude towards Educating Second Language Students

Crawford (1999) makes the connection between immigration patterns and world events to America’s philosophy towards educating second language children, beginning with the decision not to adopt a national language for our country. He traces the attitudes and perceptions of the general population, as well as the changes that have occurred in education as a consequence of the rise and fall of specific ethnic groups i.e. German, Hispanic and Asian. Crawford continues on by covering politics, theory, practice, and policy of bilingual education highlighting California’s ever expanding diverse population, especially as it relates to students within public schools. He concludes by looking at the most current policies regarding second language instruction including a report from Stanford University that recommends “two overarching principles: 1. Language-minority students must be provided with an equal opportunity to learn the same challenging content and high-level skills that school reform movements advocate for all students. 2. Proficiency in two or more languages should be promoted for all American students. Bilingualism enhances cognitive and social growth, competitiveness in a global marketplace, national security, and understanding of diverse peoples and cultures” (Crawford, 1999, p.234).

As described by the Carnegie Foundation, community engagement theory, or classification, is the connection between education and larger community as a whole. Students are not simply pupils in isolation, rather they bring with them a piece of the

community in which they live. In order to more fully educate students, we must engage those that are an active part of their life (The Carnegie Foundation, n.d.).

Griego-Jones and Fuller (2003) set out to help pre-service, as well as new teachers meet the needs of Hispanic students. The authors begin with statistical information about the Hispanic population in the United States to include the fact that, “Half of all Hispanics live in just two states, California (31 percent) and Texas (19 percent), and the majority of these Hispanics are Mexican American” (Jones and Fuller, 2003, p.7). Jones and Fuller (2003) go on to define “culture” and bring to light when a child’s cultural ways are similar to their teacher’s culture, there is likely to be a greater understanding of what is expected of them. Knowing this, it is impossible for classroom teachers to know and understand every culture sitting in front of them in class. However, it is possible to be sensitive and learn so as to build a connection with students. In general, Hispanic students benefit from a nurturing school environment, as well as feeling that their parents and community are connected to their education. As we sensitize ourselves to the language needs of our students, Jones and Fuller (2003) highlight that it is key to remember that it is the teacher’s job to make the “cultural leaps and adjustments,” (p.29) to allow learning to happen for all students. These adjustments are presented as, creating an environment that encourages and honors language development, highlighting the contributions of Spanish language to American English, and embracing being a teacher of English as a Second Language. In conclusion, Jones and Fuller (2003) remind us that many of the students in today’s classrooms are not of the predominant culture, and we are asking these students to play by rules that they are not familiar with. By knowing our own culture, we are more sensitive to the cultures of the students we are teaching.

### Cultural Connection to Hispanic Education

Ajayi (2008) postulates that second language acquisition happens both through cultural and social aspects, and seeks to explain the gap between theory and classroom implementation of best practices. Ajayi (2008) references S.L. Thorne's summary that there is a definite connection between an individual, the greater society, and the context of learning, and that this must be recognized within the classroom. Teachers were interviewed and their responses analyzed regarding their pedagogical practices in relation to the socio-cultural experiences of their students. In part, teachers mentioned the difficulty of teaching under NCLB, forcing them to cover a certain amount of curriculum; breadth, not depth. Proposition 227, the end of bilingual education in California, was also mentioned as a hindrance to language growth. For some teachers, education feels like we are trying to implement a "one size fits all" program. Even still, the researchers of this study found that most teachers recognized the socio-cultural background of their students and did their best to honor that in their daily lessons (Ajayi, 2008).

Researcher Mays (2008) brings to light how quickly English Language Learners (ELL) are labeled "at risk" because they do not score well on standardized tests. Consequently, they are not called upon in class as often, and are not expected to excel to the same degree that their English counterparts do. Mays (2008) states that according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2005 the second language population in the United States, ages 5-17, grew to nearly 10 million. As we are faced with teaching a prescribed curriculum, we must look at ways to honor the vast cultures and languages within our schools, specifically the Hispanic population, so as to connect children with their school. Mays (2008) concludes by stating that in order to more fully educate this

growing population, we need to listen to the children, to their experiences, to their culture, and even to their language.

Smith, Stern, and Shatrova (2008) performed a qualitative study looking for factors inhibiting Hispanic parents' involvement in schools. This study was performed in a rural area, one in which Hispanic families are looking to put down roots and make a life for themselves here in the United States beyond the migrant/seasonal jobs of the past. Their research highlights the fact that Hispanic students are the most under educated major segment in the U.S. population due to poverty, language barriers, low expectations from teachers, and low parent involvement. At the core of this, Hispanic parents care, but are not getting involved due to language barriers, lack of trust, lack of understanding of school operations, and immigration status to name a few. It is suggested that notices from schools be translated into Spanish and that further studies be done focusing on schools with successful communication with Spanish speaking families (Smith et al., 2008).

Researchers Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, and Ryalls (2010) compared Latino parent involvement with other ethnicities, within Omaha public schools, as related to academic success. They begin their paper by stating, "The educational needs of minority and, in particular, Latino students in the United States are of growing concern, at least partly because of the dramatic increase in the minority student population" (p.391). Parents were asked to complete a survey in which they indicated how involved they were with their child's education both at school and at home, as a basis to dispel the myth that Latino families place a lower sense of value on education because they are not as involved as their white and black counterparts. Ryan et al. (2010) point to Epstein's six parent involvement categories as a springboard for their survey. These categories include:

parenting, learning at home, school-home communication, volunteering at school, involvement in school decision making, and community collaboration. Upon reviewing the surveys, Ryan et al.'s (2010) research indicates that while white American families indicated a higher involvement in their child's education, Latino parents placed a high value both academic and social success in school. The researchers conclude by cautioning educators and school psychologists against placing too much emphasis on parent involvement without taking into consideration a broad definition of the term (Ryan et al., 2010).

### **Statistics**

The following are statistical facts taken directly from the California Language Census: Spring 2009 (California Department of Education, 2010b) demonstrating that English learners are a significant portion of California public school student population:

- 1,513,233 English learners constitute 24.2 percent of the total enrollment in California public schools.
- A total of 2,725,277 students speak a language other than English in their homes. This number represents about 43.6 percent of the state's public school enrollment.
- The majority of English learners (68 percent) are enrolled in the elementary grades, kindergarten through grade six. The rest (31 percent) are enrolled in the secondary grades, seven through twelve; and 1 percent are in the ungraded category.

In the 2008-2009 school year, there were approximately 1.5 million English learners in California public schools, nearly the same number as the 2007-2008 school year.

Although English learner data are collected for 55 language groups, 95 percent speak one of the top ten languages in the state:

- |                     |                   |                    |
|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1) Spanish: 84.8%   | 5) Hmong: 1.2%    | 9) Punjabi: 0.6%   |
| 2) Vietnamese: 2.4% | 6) Korean: 1.0%   | 10) Armenian: 0.5% |
| 3) Pilipino: 1.5%   | 7) Mandarin: 0.8% |                    |
| 4) Cantonese: 1.4%  | 8) Arabic: 0.6%   |                    |

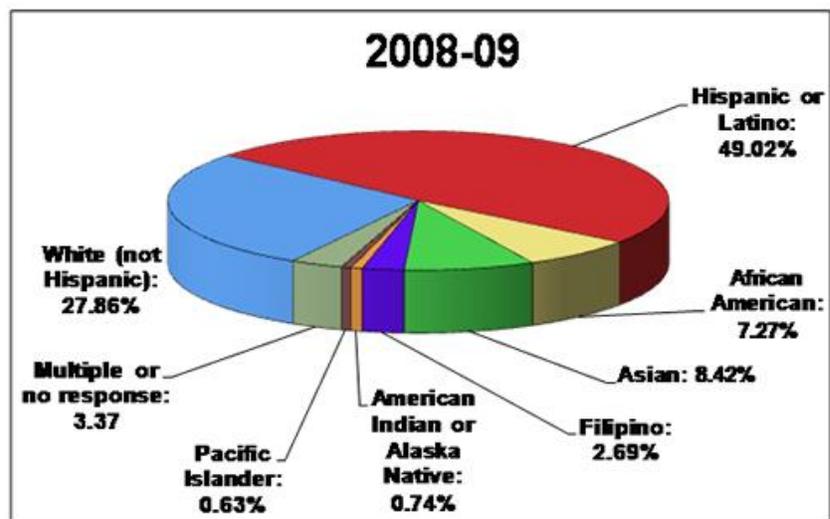
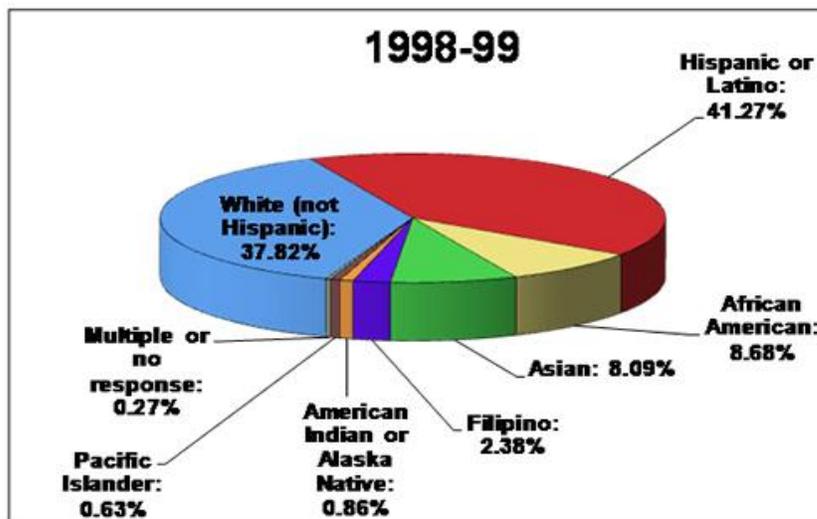
According to the statutes and regulations established by Proposition 227, English learners are placed in a variety of instructional program settings. The following numbers demonstrate the manner in which 1,491,039 English learners receive various combinations of instructional approaches (CDE, 2010b).

- A total of 147,023 receive only English Language Development (ELD) instruction in addition to the regular school program.
- A total of 843,388 receive at least one period of EDL and two periods of Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) and sheltered instruction in subjects such as mathematics or social science in addition to the regular school offerings.
- A total of 313,769 receive, in addition to ELD and SDAIE, at least two periods of subject matter instruction facilitated by primary language support.
- A total of 75,203 receive, in addition to ELD and often in combination with SDAIE and/or primary language support, at least two subject matter periods taught through primary language instruction.
- A total of 111,656 receive English learner instructional services other than those described above.
- A total of 22,194 English learners do not receive any instructional services required for English learners.

The following information is in regards to the instructional staff working with English learners in California (CDE, 2010c).

- A total of 5,304 teachers hold a bilingual teaching authorization and are assigned to provide primary language instruction.
- A total of 204,270 teachers hold a California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) credential, certificate, or authorization to provide EDL and/or SDAIE instruction.
- A total of 13,819 bilingual paraprofessionals were assigned to teachers in order to provide primary language support or instruction to English learners.

The following charts reflect the changes in the racial/ethnic groups as represented in California schools. In ten years, California has seen a rise in Hispanic student population by 7.75% and a decline of White non-Hispanic students by 9.96%. With the passage of Proposition 227 in 1998, Limited English Proficient students are now referred to as English Learner (EL) students and are considered FEP (fully English proficient) when proficiency is demonstrated through reading, writing and speaking English (CDE, 2010d).



The following chart shows the growth in English Learner student population and the frequency in which these students are re-designated as Fully English Proficient (FEP) from the school years 1981-82 to 2001-02. The chart was created by the author using information from the California Department of Education's website (CDE, 2010a).

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of EL students</b>	<b>Percent increase in EL students from previous year</b>	<b>Number of students re-designated as FEP</b>	<b>Percent re-designated from previous year EL</b>
2001-02	1,559,248	3.2%	117,450	7.8%
2000-01	1,511,299	2.1%	133,964	9.0%
1999-00	1,480,527	2.6%	112,214	7.8%
1998-99	1,442,692	2.6%	106,288	7.6%
1997-98	1,406,166	1.8%	96,545	7.0%
1996-97	1,381,393	4.4%	89,144	6.7%
1995-96	1,323,767	4.8%	81,733	6.5%
1994-95	1,262,982	3.9%	72,074	5.9%
1993-94	1,215,218	5.5%	63,379	5.5%
1992-93	1,151,819	6.8%	54,530	5.1%
1991-92	1,078,705	9.4%	55,726	5.6%
1990-91	986,462	14.5%	49,001	5.7%
1989-90	861,531	16.0%	53,223	7.2%
1988-89	742,559	13.8%	54,482	8.4%
1987-88	652,439	6.4%	57,385	9.4%
1986-87	613,224	8.0%	53,277	9.4%
1985-86	567,564	8.3%	55,105	10.5%
1984-85	524,076	7.4%	50,305	10.3%
1983-84	487,835	6.6%	47,503	10.4%
1982-83	457,540	6.0%	52,504	12.2%
1981-82	431,449	14.5%	57,336	15.2%

Total number of English Learners as a percent of total enrollment in California schools  
(Educational Data Partnership, 2011b).

Year	Number of ELs	Total Enrollment	Percent
2008-2009	1,599,248	6,252,011	24.2%
2007-2008	1,553,091	6,275,469	24.7%
2006-2007	1,568,661	6,286,943	25.0%
2005-2006	1,571,463	6,312,103	24.9%
2004-2005	1,591,525	6,322,167	25.2%
2003-2004	1,598,535	6,298,769	25.4%
2002-2003	1,599,542	6,244,403	25.6%
2001-2002	1,559,248	6,147,375	25.4%
2000-2001	1,511,299	6,050,895	25.0%
1999-2000	1,480,527	5,951,612	24.9%

Total number of *Spanish* English Learners as a percent of Hispanic enrollment in  
California schools (Educational Data Partnership, 2011a).

Year	Number of ELs	Total Hispanic Enrollment	Percent
2008-2009	1,285,545	3,064,607	49%
2007-2008	1,320,981	3,056,616	48.7%
2006-2007	1,338,611	3,026,956	48.1%
2005-2006	1,341,369	3,003,521	47.6%
2004-2005	1,347,778	2,961,067	46.8%
2003-2004	1,359,792	2,897,806	46%
2002-2003	1,348,934	2,819,504	45.2%
2001-2002	1,302,383	2,717,602	44.2%
2000-2001	1,259,954	2,613,480	43.2%
1999-2000	1,222,810	2,513,453	42.2%

The number of Hispanic students in the state of California has grown nearly 8% in the past 10 years, while the number of white, non-Hispanic student enrollment has dropped by almost 10%. Of the 1.5 million second language students enrolled in California schools, almost 85% are of Hispanic origin. Of this 85%, the majority are enrolled in kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grades. To help with the diverse language and cultural needs, more than 200,000 California teachers now hold teaching credentials that authorize them to teach second language students through the use of SDAIE or ELD methods (CDE, 2010 c).

### **Special Collections**

The University of California at Berkeley (2010) funded 31 research projects through their Center for Research Education, Diversity and Excellence (C.R.E.D.E.) over a 5-year period between 1996 and 2001. Researchers involved gathered data, as well as tested curricular models with diverse student populations. One study specifically looked at California elementary schools with significant populations of Spanish speaking Hispanic students. In the three years that followed the research, seven synthesis teams were formed to look for key findings, and to produce a variety of materials based on the diversity represented in today's classrooms across the United States.

Amongst other descriptors, CREDE's philosophy states that: English proficiency is an attainable goal for all students, bilingual proficiency is desirable for all students, language and cultural diversity can be assets for teaching and learning, and all children can learn. The team of researchers also developed a pedagogy proven to be effective in teaching second language students. The focus was on establishing best teaching practices in education rather than alignment with a set of curriculum. The five standards for

effective pedagogy according to CREDE are: teachers and students producing together, developing language and literacy across the curriculum, making lessons meaningful, teaching complex thinking and teaching through conversation.

Based on recent evidence that suggests programs that encourage continued use of a student's primary language promote high gains in learning English, CREDE researchers set out to look at bilingual programs in elementary schools. One study focused specifically on the use of a language arts transitional program designed to boost literacy rates as English language students move into mainstream classrooms from bilingual programs. Through this study, a group of second and fifth grade students were studied for one school year. Standardized tests, as well as performance assessments were conducted at the end of the school year to monitor literacy growth. The team found the following results: (1) overall, the program produces significantly higher levels of literacy attainment for English learners, (2) program effects are noticeably stronger on students in transitional bilingual programming in contrast to students in all-English programming, and (3) program effects are stronger on language measures than they are on reading (University of California Berkeley, 2010).

### **Interview with an Expert**

Maria Sanchez (pseudonym) (personal communication, November 23, 2010), was born and raised in Costa Rica. Upon graduating from the University of Costa Rica in 1995, she began teaching middle school and high school children. Ten years later, Maria applied and was accepted to participate in the Visiting International Faculty program (V.I.F.) here in the United States. Currently, 8 states and 22 countries participate in hosting exchange faculty from other countries that desire to teach abroad. Ms. Sanchez was assigned to

North West Elementary school in North Carolina; a K-5 elementary school with a student population of 950 students, with approximately 40% being Hispanic English language students. Ms. Sanchez was hired to teach 7 classes of Kindergarten English as a Second Language (ESL) students. In addition, Maria Sanchez became the official translator during school wide parent teacher meetings, and was hired by the district office to translate district documents, booklets, and pamphlets into Spanish. Ms. Sanchez currently holds her master's degree in educational leadership from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. She has returned home to Costa Rica and works both as a principal of a private elementary school and as a professor at the University of Costa Rica teaching English classes.

Ms. Sanchez's experience in working with Hispanic families spans two different environments. While she shared that she thoroughly enjoyed both, she described that one main difference between the Hispanic families here in the United States and those in Costa Rica was the struggle with language and culture. Costa Rican Hispanic students are taught in their native tongue and within their own culture. Families experience a certain amount of ease because they feel more comfortable in their environment. Within the United States, Hispanic families are faced with the challenge of learning English and fitting into a culture that is not familiar to them. Ms. Sanchez shared that reaching these families was more difficult because they were afraid of being challenged to speak another language. As well, their customs, traditions and habits contrast with those in the United States. Families generally felt that that they could not reach their children's teacher because of these differences. In general, Ms. Sanchez felt that American E.L. students

had more challenges when it came to education. She described E.L. students as having an experience of “culture shock” upon entering the school system.

When I asked Ms. Sanchez about the components of a program that would engage the Hispanic community, she kept coming back to the central idea of bringing to light the Hispanic cultural aspect. She suggested a cultural fair in which the families could share information about their native culture and traditions, and this be done at school to help the other mainstream students gain knowledge about their peers. Ms. Sanchez did this herself when she first arrived in North Carolina. The principal allowed her to take a break from classes one afternoon and host a “visit to Costa Rica”. As teachers, we brought our students by her classroom to find Ms. Sanchez dressed in traditional clothing, playing music from her country, and serving Costa Rican treats. We were exposed to a few pieces of art, a map of her country, and photographs from some of her travels from home, as well as Costa Rican candy. Her cultural pride was contagious to all my students who immediately wanted to go traveling with her. Other suggestions that Ms. Sanchez had for engaging the Hispanic community involved starting an E.L. newspaper that the families could contribute to, and holding English classes for parents while encouraging participation. Finally, she shared that holding a meeting specifically for Hispanic parents to ask questions and learn about the curriculum would be extremely beneficial. Ms. Sanchez strongly feels that the more Hispanic parents are encouraged to participate, the stronger the educational connection and relationship will be.

Now as an administrator, back in her home country, Ms. Sanchez looks for ways to involve all the families within her student body. In Costa Rica it is easier to reach the families and draw them in. Family is a high priority, as well as being involved with their

child's education. Frequently there are weekend events at the school where participation levels are high, and students enjoy showing off their hard work to their parents. One major roadblock, both in the United States and in Costa Rica, which Ms. Sanchez sees between implementing connections between school and community, is the economy. Parents in both countries are pushed to work long hours to make ends meet. Another roadblock, especially here in the United States, is training for teachers and administrators. Strategies need to be learned and developed to welcome parents of other cultures into our schools. She concludes by cautioning though that there needs to be a balance between community involvement and negatively interfering with education.

Having worked with Ms. Sanchez for 3 years, as well as visiting her in her home setting in 2010, it was fun to visualize everything that she described in this interview. She has an amazing way of interacting with Hispanic families that conveys her love of education, children, and her own learning. Ms. Sanchez has achieved a delicate balance of respect and firmness. I observed numerous families approach her in times of need. Ms. Sanchez always honored the questions and concerns brought to her, and would check into a more detailed answer if she didn't have the information at her fingertips. Now as an administrator and a university professor, Ms. Sanchez carries all these traits with her. Her colleagues stop by her office for both support and a kind word. Her university students find her approachable and knowledgeable. Upon concluding this interview, everything that I had experienced first-hand came together through her words.

## Chapter 3 Method

### **Sample and Site**

This qualitative research study used interviews to collect data on second language students, their prevalence in public schools, their unique educational needs, and the possibility of growth through connecting students' families to their schooling.

Participants were elementary school educators and administrators that spend a significant portion of their day working with second language students in public schools. The researcher has twelve years of teaching experience at the primary level in two different states; California and North Carolina. While working in North Carolina, the researcher worked closely with the English as a Second Language staff to develop an evening meeting forum to reach out to the Hispanic community and draw families into the public school system. The interviewees are committed to making the home to school connection smooth and meaningful for the betterment of Hispanic students' education.

### **Access and Permissions**

The teachers interviewed for this research project are both former colleagues and/or acquaintances. Prior to participating, the teachers were given information about the research being conducted. After gaining verbal permission from each participant, a copy of the research participant consent form was reviewed, including the participants' rights to privacy. The participants were given a copy of the signed permission form, and three individual interviews were conducted either in person or via Skype.

### **Data Gathering Strategies**

Data for this research paper was gathered through interviews, as well as classroom observations. Whenever possible, interviews were held in person. When this was not possible, interviews were held over the computer via Skype. Interviewees needed to spend most of their day with second language students for the purpose of this study. The interviews consisted of five open-ended questions being asked of each participant, with the allowance of additional information being honored as it was shared. Each participant was asked:

1. Describe your experience in working with Hispanic students and families, including what drew you to work with this specific population.
2. Describe the difference in language ability between second language students and other students for whom English is their first language.
3. In an attempt to connect the Hispanic community with the public school system, describe the components of a program that would engage the Hispanic parents and families.
4. What are the major roadblocks in implementing connections between school and community?
5. Describe your own educational background including: Where did you attend college? When and where did you begin teaching? What are the different teach placements that you've had? What draws you to work with the ESL population?

### **Data Analysis Approach**

Once the interviews were conducted, individual participant's answers were reviewed to gain a new perspective. As well, interviews were compared to look for overlaps in thought and program ideas. Finally, the information was compiled into one report to draw conclusions.

### **Ethical Standards**

This study adheres to Ethical Standards in human Subjects Research of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2007). Additionally, the project was reviewed and approved by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board, number 8213. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants to protect participants' anonymity. Additionally, school names and specific locations have been changed as well. Participants were reminded of their rights, as well as their option to withdraw from the research at any time.

## Chapter 4 Findings

### **Description of Site, Individuals, Data**

The data for this research was collected through a series of interviews held with present and former colleagues working within the public school system. One participant has experience with the Hispanic population both here and abroad. The interviewees are all college graduates, with two participants holding postgraduate degrees. On average, the participants had more than 15 years teaching experience, working specifically with second language students of Hispanic origin. The majority of the teaching day is currently spent serving the needs of this specific population within the public school setting. The school sites range in size from 500 to 1000 students, with up to 40 percent being Hispanic, second language students. One participant also works in the evening at the university level teaching English to native Spanish speakers.

### **Analysis of Themes**

All three interview participants felt strongly that they were “called” to work with Hispanic, second language students. There was a love and affinity for Spanish speaking students that resonated in their answers to the interview questions. The depth of the connection to this specific population reached beyond the demands asked of them in the classroom. The interviews revealed that there was a desire to know the cultural, language and educational needs of both the students and their families. Specific stories were shared in terms of meeting with families outside of school and after school hours. In an attempt to bridge the gap between Hispanic and American cultures, all three participants sought to help with aspects of life that included housing and healthcare in addition to education needs. Whenever possible, all participants sought ways to increase the educational

growth of Hispanic students; this translated into personal reflection, home visits and approaching administration about program changes. One participant, after learning Spanish, immersed herself in Hispanic culture, and availed herself as a liaison to past and present families in her school. After more than twenty years within the community, this participant is often invited to attend Hispanic family functions.

## Chapter 5 Discussion

### **How Present Study Compares to Previous Research**

This study concurs with previous research that suggests that as a culture, Hispanic families want their children to do well in school, are supportive of the efforts that educators make in teaching their children, and are open to providing necessary support to promote educational success to their children, albeit mostly from home. All three participants agreed with the statement by Ryan et al., “A great deal of research indicates that parents who are more involved in their children’s education have children who are more socially and academically successful in school” (p.391). The participants felt that when educators reached out to Hispanic families in their class, especially through personal contact over the phone or in person, there was a strong connection made, that in turn opened the door to parent/school connectedness. This connection often brought with it a comfort within the school and classroom, and an openness to become more visibly involved. Ultimately, it was the experience of all three participants, echoed by the findings of Smith et al. that there is a “connection between parental involvement and student achievement...” (p.9).

### **Summary of Major Findings**

There are many hurdles that a Hispanic student faces upon entering the public school system within the United States; language barriers being the first. The research by Garcia and Jensen (2009) bring to light that Hispanic students have varying degrees of language when they enter school. While many Hispanic students are now born here in the United States, it is impossible to know the extent of their language in either English or Spanish.

Researcher Stephen Krashen (2003) presents evidence to support furthering the knowledge of a student's first language to help with language acquisition and educational success. When a child is unschooled in their native tongue, they don't have the context to build upon, or the language to receive new concepts. By strengthening a student's first language, a bridge is therefore built to both acquire a second language and make academic gains.

In addition to language barriers, Hispanic students face several cultural differences that can become barriers. In general, American society promotes individuality, while the Hispanic culture promotes community. Public school is often the first time that Hispanic students face the task of standing alone. By promoting group work and/or collaboration, educators can bridge the gap between the cultures for Hispanic students. Another cultural divide that exists can be seen when we look at parental attitudes towards education. There is a stark contrast between Hispanic families holding the teacher in high regard, giving the impression of taking a hands-off approach, and American school culture establishing that a team effort between institution and family is the best practice. Hispanic families are sometimes labeled as uncaring because their support is often quiet and behind the scenes. It is important that the term parental involvement be looked at from a broader, more inclusive perspective. It is also important to recognize the need for Hispanic families to be *invited* in to participate in schools.

Finally, through this research it is extremely obvious that immigration patterns have shifted. Where schools once looked to meet the needs of a variety of European cultures, educators now teach in classrooms with an ever-increasing amount of Hispanic students. As the demographics in our schools change, researchers suggest that greater

academic growth might be made if students saw themselves represented in the books they read and the assignments they participate in. Involving families to become involved to the extent of their ability, through homework assignments and special school functions, furthers the connection between students, meaningful curriculum, and academic growth.

### **Limitations/Gaps in the Literature**

The research presented here, is not without limitations. While an attempt was made to collect data from a variety of sources to include a participant from California, North Carolina and Costa Rica, the data is limited to the participants' experience and perspectives. It is unclear whether the findings in this study would correlate to other parts of the country, in particular the mid-West. What is clear is that according to current census data, there is no question that the Hispanic population continues to grow throughout the United States. In terms of education, Ryan et al. (2010) state it best, "The educational needs of minority and, in particular, Latino students in the United States are of growing concern, at least partly because of the dramatic increase in the minority student population" (p.391). As the demographics change in our country, and therefore in our schools, educators need to make the adjustments to meet the educational needs of this diverse population.

The literature presents several possible adjustments to be made, to include recognizing and exploring differing cultures within the state mandated curriculum, and involving families in educational assignments, but further changes could be investigated. With the constant push to increase reading scores, how do educators balance the curriculum that is mandated by the state, with the cultural needs of the students that are seated in front of them? Is there a formula for the amount of teacher contact with

Hispanic families that promotes comfort for this culture? How do we define parent involvement in terms of American *and* Hispanic cultures? How do we keep the communication flowing between Hispanic families, the school as a system and educators, especially as students move from grade level to grade level? Should educators be expected to extend a special welcome and avail themselves after hours? Though I did not come across statistical data to correlate years of parental involvement to a certain level of student success achieved within school, narrative, first hand studies offered evidence that parental involvement improved student growth within the classroom.

### **Implications for Future Research**

While there appears to be a significant amount of data that shows the growing prevalence of Hispanic students in American public schools, coupled with research on Hispanic student academic progress, or lack thereof, further research could look at defining specific ways to best serve these students. We know that when students and families feel connected to the educational process, there is a greater level of academic growth. As we look to increase language fluency, reading scores and overall academic success, it will be important to look beyond the teaching structure of the past. Future research might involve a longitudinal look at classrooms and schools that are reaching beyond American culture, to include Hispanic cultural customs. Is there a significant increase in academic growth, over a period of five plus years, when students feel that their families are involved in their education?

### **Overall Significance of the Literature**

The literature suggests that students make greater academic gains when their families are equal shareholders in the process, and that Hispanic students are not experiencing this to

the degree that their English-speaking counterparts are. This study echoes the findings that extra attention needs to be given to meet the needs of the growing Hispanic student population here in California, as well as across the United States. As educators, we need to take a closer look at specific ways that we reach out to involve families in our classrooms; specifically Hispanic families. It goes without saying that the mentality of, “this is what I’ve always done” is not working. Hispanic parental involvement cannot be ignored.

### **A Proposed Model**

The following, though not exhaustive, is a recommendation to the education community, to enhance the connectivity of Hispanic students to their education, with the intention of boosting educational growth.

- **Outreach:** First and foremost, the Hispanic community needs to feel welcomed into the school system. Due to cultural differences and language barriers, this is best achieved through personal contact with students' family members via a telephone call or a home visit.
- **Training:** Hispanic families are accustomed to honoring the job of the teacher and providing support from home. When inviting Hispanic parents to volunteer and/or participate in school activities, it's beneficial to explain the expectations of volunteers and *how* to help.
- **Curriculum:** Much of today's curriculum depicts images of Euro-Americans. It is important to look for curriculum that takes into consideration the many different cultures represented in the demographics of the class. Students relate to seeing images that reflect themselves and their cultures' traditions. Learning thus becomes more valid and concrete when there is something to relate to.
- **School to home connection:** Opportunities to connect families through homework assignments and coming to school for special evenings provide further connectivity. This can be achieved through special assignments to be completed at home between student and parent, or evening school events such as literacy or family math night.

- Culture: Honoring the culture of Hispanic families and students can be achieved through conversations in class, literature chosen to be read to the class, curricular units taught, and students sharing of their traditions.
- Special events/meetings: Hold informational evening meetings that parents can come to after work. This serves to provide invaluable connectivity and resources for Hispanic families. Inviting community organizations to speak about free or reduced cost services can be beneficial. Important curricular information can be disseminated; possibly even modeling a typical classroom lesson. Allow time for parents to ask questions; encourage personal questions to be asked as well.
- Adult ESL classes: Many communities have free English classes for adults. Providing families with this information may encourage participation. One participant in this study shared that her school site had begun to offer classes on-site during the school day.

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