

Creating a Successful Educational Environment for the Latino/a Community: Building Home-School Communication

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ABSTRACT

California has a large population of Latino/a students, and for most of them Spanish is their native language. The problem is the miscommunication between Latino/a families and educators in the school setting. Teachers often do not understand Spanish and are unable to communicate with parents or students. Latino/a families are not aware of the ways to support their children, given this lack of ability to communicate.

A review of the literature reveals the cultural and language barriers that teachers face. Teachers also lack support within their school in providing appropriate instruction for Latino/a students and in communicating with Latino/a families.

This study follows qualitative design using classroom observations in a field placement and school setting as well as interviews with teachers who have a majority of students in their classrooms who are Latino/a. Purposively elected teachers with experience in working with English language learners were recruited for interviews. Parents of Latino/a students were interviewed about the quality of the communication between school and home that is provided by the school. They were interviewed for an hour responding to a series of open-ended questions. Interviewees were purposefully selected because they are part of the Latina/o community who try to create home-school communication.

Results indicated that having home-school communication with Latino/a students increased their academic performance. Students felt they had support from their parents. Parents were also more inclined to be a part of their child's education if they could communicate with the teacher. Implications from the results include the need for teachers to make home-school communication a priority for Latino/a students and their families.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Being raised in a household where only Spanish was spoken, English was not a language that was heard often. However, as I began kindergarten I knew I was going to have to learn a new language. I was placed in an all-Hispanic class with a bilingual teacher. Although it was helpful and I was able to understand what the teacher wanted me to do, I felt as if I was always behind. Students who had been placed in the English speaking classes were reading chapter books while we were still leaning how to translate words from Spanish to English.

My parents were very hesitant to go to school functions because they thought that they would not understand discussions at school board meetings. They would go to teacher conferences where either my older brother or I had to translate for them. As a result of this experience, I still go to Back to School Night or to Open House at my former elementary school, and translate, so that Spanish speaking parents can understand and become involved in their child's education.

Statement of the Problem

English language learners struggle to become proficient in English. It is not only that they are not native English speakers, but also because there is not adequate communication between parents and educators. A parent's involvement is crucial in a student's academic development.

Having parental support in their education helps students feel supported in school. However, this is not the case for many Latino/a students. Many Latino/a parents are not proficient in English and feel limited when it comes to promoting their own children's education.

Miscommunication and limited teacher preparation are factors that influence the quality of home and school support within the Latino/a community. Many Latino/a students fall behind in their English proficiency.

Educational professionals need to adequately provide information for Latino/a parents in a manner in which they can understand. Historically education in Mexico is not as emphasized as in the United States in terms of the value placed on finding employment and financially helping one's family.

Information sent home from school in translated form, often are written in a scholarly fashion. Teacher who go to websites for translation tools may not understand that the Spanish translation does not make sense. Parents as a result are misled or confused because they are unable to understand the school information. This results in parents feeling hesitant about participating in their child's education. It is therefore important that translations sent home are at a reading and comprehension level that a Spanish speaking person can understand.

In building communication between home and school, with documents that families are unable to comprehend, the unintended consequence, or disruption is that parents disengage from their children's school. To resolve this break in communication one must try to understand the Latino/a culture in terms of literacy, language usage, and comprehensibility of documents that make their way into the home.

School personnel take the time to learn the needs of the community in building home-school communication. A basic concept is to make sure that all written communication to the home is understandable.

Unfortunately Latina/o parents are sometimes provided with inept translations of homework assignments, school newsletters, or classroom information. This limits Latina/o parents to participate in their child's education, creating two separate environments for the child, the home environment and the school environment, instead of having both blending and working with each other.

School district personnel need to approach the issue of miscommunication between the school and Latina/o parents. A high concentration of Latino/a students in California's public education implies that a change is needed in building effective home-school communication. School personnel need to offer educators Spanish resources whether in the form translators or Spanish courses professionals may take. Home and school communication should be an important factor for teachers to consider therefore, making learning Spanish a necessity.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to help educators know how to properly and effectively work with Latino/a students in building home and school communication. This study is important because there is a large population of Latino/a students in public education. Change is needed in building communication between home and school. Change is also needed for teachers in their ability to motivate, encourage, empower and build literacy with Latino/a students.

Reasons for Building Home and School Communication

- Allowing Latino/a students to feel parental support.
- Fostering meaningful connections between home and school.
- Increasing home school connection encourages parents to help in the classroom and attend school functions.
- Creating more personal relationships between teachers and parents.

Purpose of the Study

The Spanish speaking population is large and concentrated in California. Latino/a students are part of the education system. They have equal rights to education according to The Civil

Rights Act of 1964 (The United States Department of Justice, 2013). The reality is that the Latino/a students have been considered a separate population, leading to limited efforts on the part of school districts to establish effective communication practices. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to understand the nature of current home and school communication with the Latino community as well as to promote positive and effective communication practices.

Background Information

September 4, 1957 was the day that education changed. Little Rock Nine was the pathway for educational equality within the United States. The African American community was the first to integrate into a white school. This historical event mirrors similar segregation barriers that Jose Angel Gutierrez overcame through education. The Texas native Graduated Crystal City High and earned a master's degree in political science and became a leader in the Chicano civil rights movement. He later returned to Crystal City where he helped students advocate for equality within their school (Mondale & Patton, 2001, p. 152).

Research Questions

1. What improvements can be made to build communication between home and school for the Latino/a community?
2. What school and community resources are available to support building communication skills and building teacher preparation and building English language proficiency?

Definition of Terms

As the researcher kept reading data and literature there were terms that were reoccurring such as communication: the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone (Dictionary.com, 2014) Latino/a: a person who was born or lives in South America, Central America, or Mexico or a person in the U.S. whose family is originally from South America, Central America, or Mexico (Dictionary.com, 2014) The two definitions state the ethnic group and the factor to creating positive home and school communication.

CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to build home school communication in the Latino/a community. Having access to school, the right of all students also includes access for families whose language is not English, for the purpose of engaging with school personnel and building close connections. The literature review addresses the following issues that affect home-school communication: Teacher Preparations; Classroom Setting; English Proficiency and Parent Involvement.

Teacher Preparation

Bilingual education uses a hybrid or combination of different languages. For English language learners it allows them to follow instructions and feel assertive while participating or working in class. In this article the author, Inbar-Lourie, (2010) looks into the different ways teacher teach bilingual students. The article was written using a study that was conducted in Hebrew and Arabic middle schools. Teachers were observed during this study. Data collection included observation, teacher's self-report questioners, and interviews. The researcher found that in the communities in which many languages were embraced, the students had higher proficiency in the second language learned compared to schools with a focus on one language only.

For this study, a sample group of six teachers from four different schools were observed. They were observed for about three lessons and were graded on a five-point scale. They were graded on their ability to teach and use English in their class. One of the observation made on a teacher was, "Natasha tries to cope with the disciplinary issues that she faces by constantly code-switching between English and Hebrew, with Hebrew definitely gaining the upper hand."

(Inbar-Lourie, 2010, p.) The study showed that it was hard for students to learn a new language when the teacher did not have the right or sufficient experience. There is also a chart in the study that breaks down the language combinations of the schools and their diversity.

Overall, the study found that teachers need to be sensitive to languages children speak in their classroom. Parents possibly do not feel comfortable accessing information from schools because it is not in their native language. There needs to be positive communication practices that are implemented. The results found that students that had more exposure to their own native language were better prepared.

This article informs my research by looking at the positive aspects of English language learners who taught in their native language. It shows that students participate more in class because they feel secure in what they are being taught. By this they are able to follow instructions. However, the study also demonstrates that the teacher have to be well prepared if they are going to submerge their students into a new language.

Classroom Setting

Learning a new language is always a difficult task. However, as an educator one has to be prepared to guide and help students achieve success. In this article the authors state that in order to help English language learners they themselves must be prepared.

Language in the English as a Second Language and General Education Classrooms: A Tutorial (Brice, Miller, and Brice, 2006) was written using qualitative research that was previously done. The studies were based on bilingual students in general education classrooms. It also paid attention to the discourse skills among the school professionals. They found that bilingual students who were immersed in English enriched classrooms were better facilitated while learning the language.

For this study both bilingual students and educators were observed. They were presented with a strategy program “Planning and Communication,” (Brice et al., 2006). These strategies included planning lessons that allow bilingual students to use English in purposeful dialogue. Also establishing a pattern of communicating with other students and professionals. By communicating more with students and other educators they were able to help English language learners more.

Overall, this study found that Bilingual students benefited by being in a heterogeneous class. Having English Language learners immersed in a classroom with native English speaking students was beneficial for English language learners. As more children who are English language learners enter public education they are going to need teachers who are prepared.

This article, informs the present study by describing different strategies that benefit English language learners. It shows that educators need to be informed of different ways to help their students. The researcher shows that bilingual students need to be placed with native English language learners. This way they can help each other learn and eventually move to becoming proficient in English.

English Proficiency

Conger (2010) from the University of Washington writes of the problematic factors of bilingual education. Conger uses the settlement known as the “Aspira Consent Decree,” which has been modified over the years. (Conger, 2010) This public document requires public education institutions with high English language learners to offer bilingual education. In the bilingual education students would be taught mainly in their native language. English language learners are therefore, taught in their native language and later transitioned into English. The

study was conducted in New York, a state with many Spanish-speaking students. However, there are a variety of different languages other than Spanish that are addressed in this study.

The issue was that other students who were not Spanish speaking did not have the same opportunity. In order to have bilingual education there needed to be a high percentage of students with the same native language. Students that do not have a high population were put into ESL classes. ESL students were placed with English speakers and instructed in English. While students in bilingual education have textbooks that are both in English and in Spanish. Conger's (2010) conclusion showed that students in the bilingual education program learned English at a slower rate.

This article informs my research because it demonstrates that, although bilingual education is profitable, it also sets some English language learners behind in terms of their English language proficiency. This article identifies some of the problems with bilingual education. It also sheds light on the positive and negative aspects of bilingual education. With the information gathered from this article, I learned that instruction in one's native language is important to build a solid English foundation. In the future much information will be in English. English language learners experience difficulty with their own English learning according to Conger (2010).

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is highly important for a child's education. However, there are other factors that limit parent involvement in the Latino community. In the literature it states the importance to know that there are cultural differences. For example there are factors such as some parents feel as though they are overstepping the school's authority if they offer their help. Latino families have barriers to participation due to economic, linguistic, cultural, or life circumstances. For example, Latino families who immigrate to the United States for economic

reasons may be working several jobs, attempting to acquire English literacy, and just starting to learn about the structure of the U.S. educational system (Olivos and Mendoza, 2010). These are outside factors that limit Latino parents to be an active participant in their child's education.

In the article the researcher looks at all the factors that may play a role in the time spent volunteering. The data also states that Latino parents may offer moral support and encouragement, as those activities play to their cultural strengths and are available to them even if they are still acquiring English or do not understand the structure of the school curriculum. Therefore, instead of describing Latino parents as "not involved," a more accurate statement would be that their style and rate of school-based involvement may differ from other groups (Olivos and Mendoza, 2010).

Data reflected the differences in effective invitations to Latino families. Parental roles related to home-based involvement, expand role construction to school-based involvement, and be understanding of barriers related to communication, transportation, time, or trust (Olivos and Mendoza2010). Invitations to Spanish-speaking Latino parents should be bilingual and should include information about access to interpreters for meetings or events . Information should be clear and should inform parents what is expected of them. Latino communities are interested in helping and being part of their child education; however, time, linguistic and cultural circumstances sometimes get in the way.

Summary

Communication is key in creating a home and school relationship. Children who enter a classroom where the teacher has some background knowledge of the Spanish language, and the classroom setting is inviting may feel a personal connection to school.

Latino families tend to fall under the umbrella of low-income or middle class, meaning that parents might need to work two jobs and might not have the adequate hours to volunteer in the classroom. Additionally, immigrant Latino families may not know how to navigate the American school system. Teamwork is what is needed from school personal and Latino families to create a positive home and school communication system.

CHAPTER III METHODS

Research Design

This research follows qualitative design using interviews using open-ended questions and observations. This research study addressed the following questions: What improvements can be made to build communication between home and school for the Latino/a community? What school and community resources are available to support building communication skills and building teacher preparation and building English language literacy?

The review of the literature on building home and school communication identified that certain factors contribute to success for students of Spanish speaking backgrounds. Teacher Preparation is necessary for successful home-school communication. It also indicates that the classroom environment and English proficiency is crucial in allowing parents to be active in their child's education.

Ethical Standards

This study adheres to the ethical standards established by the American Psychological Association (2010) that safeguards participation of human subjects in research. Additionally, this study was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board of the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number #10218

Participants

Participants include three teachers, a retired principal, and three Latino/a parents. Participants were purposefully selected because of the nature of the topic. Teachers were selected based on their background knowledge. Latino parents were interviewed based on their background and knowledge of the type of home-school communication that is offered at their school site. A retired principal was interviewed who was able to reach out to the Latino community and create better home-school communication system.

The school faculty participates in the interview were two males and two females. They have held their position of teachers for more than ten years. They all teach in northern California, which is divided into many different school districts. An elementary in Marin County participated in the study. The elementary is located in a rural area of working class people. There is diversity but it is not as visible due to the small class sizes.

The parents that participated in the interview were two females and one male. They come from Latino cultures and all have or have had children go through the American education system. They were also selected because they have been in California for a long period of time and witnessed the change in priority to build better communication practices with the Latino community.

Procedures

Following IRB approval the researcher contacted potential interview subjects and informed the participants of the purpose of the study. They were told them that their responses would be kept confidential. The participants signed a consent form stating their rights.

Participants were contacted via email and face-to-face interaction. Participants all agreed to be part of the research project.

Interview questions were designed to aid the research on factors that would improve home and school communication. Teachers were asked specifically about their school and how they felt their school site served the Latino community. Parents were asked questions pertaining to the type of communication that they were receiving and whether they felt included in the school environment.

CHAPTER IV FINDINGS

Through interview responses, parents and educators created a picture of the realities of home and school communication within the Latino community. The questions had to deal with Latino parent involvement and how communication could be establish from home and school to this community. Responses from the interviews are listed below. General themes were identified and labeled.

<i>1. Please tell me how you became interested in teaching.</i>
After receiving my BA in psychology with the idea of becoming a children and family counselor, I spent a year as a teacher's assistant in a junior high special day class for learning disabled children. I began to feel I could have more of a positive impact in children's lives by being a teacher, instead of a psychologist. I also found I very much enjoyed finding clear and creative ways to engage students in learning. I applied to the teaching credential program and began the coursework as I worked for one more year in the teacher's assistant job. I took a fascinating course fall quarter called "The Nature of Bilingualism" and decided to obtain a bilingual credential.
<i>2. How do you structure lessons for native English speakers and Latino/a students?</i>
I have been trained in using GLAD strategies (Guided Language Acquisition Design) and use these strategies extensively with my students. I teach nearly everything around a theme (such as animals and their habitats, community helpers, families around the work, plants and their changes through the seasons) and we stay on the same theme for about 2 months. This allows all students to thoroughly master the vocabulary and concepts and keeps the children very interested in learning more. I use many gestures, songs, photographs and other visuals to add meaning and depth to aide in comprehension. These strategies help all children learn and make the curriculum accessible to children who may be learning English as a second language.

<p><i>What are some obstacles in having a language barrier with the Latino community?</i></p>
<p>I speak Spanish and so don't usually feel I have a language barrier with the Latino community. I meet with parents without the need for an interpreter but sometimes feel I'm seen as an outsider because of cultural differences and differences in socio-economics. I know teachers who don't speak Spanish wish they could communicate directly with parents.</p>
<p><i>What are the benefits for an English language learner to be in a heterogeneous class?</i></p>
<p>The world is a heterogeneous place and all children need to learn to work together and work to understand and respect one another. We all need to learn to manage the dynamics of difference and see where we can come together. There are times during the day when I sometimes have the children in homogeneous groups to teach a skill all the children in the group need to work on. Otherwise, I use heterogeneous grouping.</p>
<p><i>Can you describe the interaction between Latino/a students and native English language speakers in and out of the classroom?</i></p>
<p>During structured work time the children are learning to work together in teams, respect one another and accomplish tasks together. During free choice time I see the children choose to play in mixed language groups sometimes and other times they play with children who are from their language group. There is a fair amount of fluidity in play both indoors and out on the playground.</p>
<p><i>Describe your preparation in teaching English Language Learners?</i></p>
<p>I received a bilingual-multicultural multiple-subject credential as well as a single subject credential to teach Spanish. I have attended the CAFE conference for bilingual educators 6 times and have received the GLAD training (a system of highly effective ELD strategies) twice. I have also been trained in TPR (total physical response) and TPRS Storytelling (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling). Our district is also in its fourth year of a grant to close the achievement gap and I have been trained in Cultural Proficiency and am currently being trained in social-emotional literacy.</p>

<i>How do you integrate Latino/a families into your class?</i>
I teach a 3-week Jump Start Program right before school begins in the fall. This program welcomes kindergarten student and their families into the world of school. I offer demonstrations in reading with your children, making healthy choices and on everyday math strategies. I meet with each family before school begins, in the fall and in the spring. I also attend nearly all ELAC meetings (English Learner Advisory Committee) and taught a math class in Spanish to parents last year. Next school year our school plans on increasing the family learning opportunities we offer and I look forward to being very involved in this effort.
<i>What else do you think is important for me to know?</i>
I think we are moving in the right direction in providing access and support for Latino/a students and their families, but that we have a lot more work to do. I applaud your interest in this topic and for becoming part of the solution! Good luck and let me know how else I might help.

Themes

In interviewing four school personal reoccurring themes were present in their answers. The main theme is that communication is key in creating a relationship with families. Many if not most schools have translators that are available for teachers and parents. The teachers mentioned that their school district received a grant that was given to close the achievement gap within the school. Part of this grant was given to close the communication gap within the community. The school created a Latina mother book club where childcare is provided while mothers talk about literature. Additionally, interviewees stated that resources to creating a positive home and school communication are becoming more accessible to them.

Parents

Latino/a parents who were interviewed were excited and very willing to participate in the interviews. Four parents were interviewed to explain and analyze the type of communication that is provided in their child's education. I asked parents if there were any frustrations in the translations that were being sent home and the type of communication that was being practiced. M.R. said that translations and home-school communication has improved greatly over the years. She had three children all attend the small schools. The differences were that when she first enrolled her eldest son there was not much communication. She was intimidated because she did not feel as if she were part of the school district. Latino parents all said the same thing, "We came to the United States for a better life, a life where our children could have an education. An education that we did not have." A.R. said "I wanted to be part of my child's education but work was always a priority because I had to financially support my family."

Data Analysis

After completing all the interviews the researcher recorded responses. The researcher identified common themes including similarities and differences among the responses among the responses of the three interviews.

Summary of Findings

Latino/a communities are hesitant when coming to school functions. The differences in culture play a role in the manner in which they support their children. However, having parents involvement and strong community support allows students to grow, work and advance academically.

As the Latino community increased in size over the years there were different needs. Teachers and administrators have to transition their teaching communication practices. They also

have to implement resources that were can be provided to Latino families such as translators. A mutual respect for diversity is also needed in today's education. The Latino/a community is growing rapidly and the need for improving home-school communication is important. There were two themes that were reoccurring in my research, such as community building and accepting diversity.

Major Themes

Community Building

Creating a strong and multicultural community is key in creating a positive home and school communication within a school. M.S stated in her interview, "Our district is also in its fourth year of a grant to close the achievement gap in the school." By being awarded this grant their school is able to provide the Latino/a community with literacy clubs and afternoon math classes for parents who want to continue their education. I also learned that one needs to know the needs of the community and be educated and know how to respond to problems that the Latino/a community is facing, one of several factors includes language. I interviews two bilingual teachers and two teachers whom did not know Spanish. The two teachers who were able to communicate with the Spanish-speaking parents found that parents were more willing to go into their classroom and help. The parents were able to participate in their child's education without feeling intimidated.

Accepting Diversity

Accepting that not everyone is the same is a constant that every interviewee. One teacher said, "The world is a heterogeneous place and all children need to learn to work together and work to understand and respect one another. We need to learn to manage the dynamics of difference and see where we can come together." As the society becomes more global we all

need to learn to accept everyone differences and learn to work together by communicating with one another.

CHAPTER V DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to research the possible factors that pertain in creating a positive home and school communication system for Latino families in a school setting. There needs to be more resources that are available to teachers and Latino/a families. Research questions included the following: What improvements can be made to build communication between home and school for the Latino/a community? What school and community resources are available to support building communication skills and building teacher preparation and building English language proficiency?

The review of the literature identified useful methods to enhance home and school communication with the Latino/a community. One is creating a community environment with the students and parents. Also having parent involvement in a child's education is important. Latino parents are sometimes described as "not involved," however, a more accurate statement would be that their style and rate of school-based involvement may differ from other groups (Olivos and Mendoza, 2010). Additionally, teachers need to have access to resources such as translators and professionals to create home and school communication.

Interviews with M.R revealed that when students are in an environment where accepting differences is encouraged. Additionally, students are now living in a global environment where accepting individual differences is important.

Limitations

Limitation in this study included finding literature that stated how exactly to solve the language barrier problem with the Latino/a community. There are many factors that contribute to the problem of home school communication in the Latino/a community. Other limitations

included limited teacher response to the questions. The findings also pertain to a rural school district that has seen an increase in Latino/a population over the years and have worked towards closing the gap.

Implications

Serious attention needs to be paid to home and school communication within a school setting. However, it is also necessary to create positive practices with communities for people who do not speak English as their native language. As more Latino/a parents and students integrate into the public school system there needs to be programs that make the transition easier and encourages parents to be active in their child's education.

Practical Implications

There are programs that are willing to help Latino/a families in certain areas. Possible solutions are finding organizations that are willing to meet the community needs. It seems that a future teacher should look into resources that the community provides to integrate positive home and school communication practices.

Research Implications

Further researchers may find it helpful to observe a variety of different school districts with many ethnical differences. To compare the different types of communication practices that schools use in their school cite. Additionally, a future researcher may want to compare the Latino/a's parent education and research the differences and notice if they are involved in their child's education. Lastly, because I had limitations to interview other teachers I would recommend that future researchers ask a wider range of teachers from different geographical areas as well as interviewing the parents.

Conclusions

Building home and school communication within the Latino community is a large issue. Other professionals have examined the importance of creating a positive home and school communication with the Latino community. There are many resources that teachers can use to enhance the different types of communication that are sent home to Latino/a parents. In the process of completing my research project I gained knowledge on enhancing home and school communication with the Latino/a community and creating a positive school experience for the students and their families.

About the Author

Talyha Romo is a junior Liberal Studies Major at Dominican University of California. Born and raised in northern California Talyha Romo stayed in the area to receive her teaching credential. She has also been interested in ways to help the Latino/a community and enhancing home and school communication. Her interest started when she was elected to be student representative on the school board. She became aware that there were only a couple of Latino/a parents. This was a problem that somehow needed to be addressed because attending school board meetings are very important. Additionally, Talyha always served as a translator for her parents at teacher parent conferences and is still currently serving as a translator at her former elementary school. The lack of communication inspired her research possible factors and solutions for the lack of communication.

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