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Parent Involvement: Influencing Factors and Implications
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Summary: This study looked at how parents in one urban elementary school in Texas, with a population that was 95.5 percent Mexican American, were or were not involved and what factors influenced their involvement. The researcher identified several factors that influenced parent involvement. Parents also offered suggestions for how the school might build better collaborative relationships with parents and increase their involvement.

The study addresses the dearth of research about the involvement of Mexican-American families in their children's schooling. The school that was studied was a year-round campus with multi-age classes and a dual-language program that provided all students with the opportunity to become biliterate and bilingual in Spanish. The researcher cooperated with four teachers, two at the prekindergarten/kindergarten level and two at the third-/fourth-grade level. At each level, one class had students whose parents primarily spoke English and the other had primarily Spanish-speaking parents.

For this qualitative case study, the researcher collected data over the course of one school year (1997–1998). She conducted interviews with parents of children in two prekindergarten/kindergarten and two third-/fourth-grade classes, their teachers, and principals. She also made observations of a range of meetings and activities and examined school documents regarding parent involvement. The four participating teachers distributed letters of information/consent to a total of 75 parents. Interviews with 28 parents who agreed to participate, as well as the four teachers and the principals, were held at the convenience of the participants. Data were also gathered from home visits, parent meetings, informal discussions, observations of parent-teacher conferences, and documents such as minutes from meetings of the advisory council and parent teacher organization. The focus of the study was involvement and communication.

Findings

The study found that cultural attitudes about the role of parents, language barriers, parent cliques, parents' educational level, attitudes of school staff, and family issues, such as childcare, influenced the involvement of parents in the activities organized by the school. Although the school implemented a federally funded dual-language program, English was the preferred language at parent meetings and since no translation was provided, many monolingual Spanish-speaking parents felt their attendance was unnecessary. Some parents, even those fluent in Spanish, preferred to conduct meetings in English, which resulted in a language problem for those parents who did not speak English. Parent cliques, divided along language lines, determined who "made the most decisions for all the parents." Since most of the staff were bilingual, school assemblies, parent-teacher conferences, and workshops for parents were conducted in both languages.

Parents' literacy level was another factor that influenced their participation in the school. Staff made assumptions that parents knew what to do for back-to-school night or how to make ABC books. Most communication was print based only. No accommodations were made for those parents who did not understand, leaving them feeling intimidated and confused.

Attitudes of school staff (including the principal) made some parents feel "patronized." They felt judged negatively because of their need for assistance and that they were not welcomed. The study also found that cultural differences between U.S.-born parents and those born in Mexico influenced parents' expectations of the school and how they should be involved. Family issues, such as transportation, childcare, work schedules, and simply finding time to participate affected their participation in school activities. The school did attempt to help with transportation by providing buses for back-to-school night and by providing childcare for some of the workshops.

Parents gave recommendations for improving parent involvement in their school. These included changing the attitudes of school staff to "make the parent feel more welcome"; taking parents' interests into consideration when planning activities; recognizing that even if parents cannot be present at school, helping their children at home is also a valuable contribution; and providing parents with knowledge about how to be involved in a range of involvement opportunities.

Conclusions

"First, schools need to create a hierarchy of involvement opportunities for parents, ranging from working with their children at home to participation in school decision making. Second, schools should provide parents with the knowledge in order to participate in any of these activities" (p. 53). The factors that are related to involving culturally diverse families in schools described in this study corroborate what has been found in much previous research. While the study does not discuss the influence of parent involvement on student achievement at the school that was studied, it does provide a very descriptive case example that raises awareness about some of the common barriers to parent involvement and how they might be addressed.

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