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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement has been promoted by politicians and educators as the cure all for academic ills in the American educational system. Programs have been funded and structured to involve all parents in schools in ways valued by middle class parents to the exclusion of language minority families, their language, and their culture. These middle class-based programs, which are founded upon a cultural deficit approach to parenting, do not provide Latino and other immigrant families with the tools they need to help their children and empower themselves. This paper describes an ethnographic investigation of home-based parent involvement as seen through the experience of a Costa Rican family in an African-American community in the northeastern United States. Using interviews, fieldnotes, and documents, this paper details a specific parental involvement effort initiated in a Latino home through a mini-grant offered by the school district. Citing literature from research on the use of funds of knowledge in school and the analysis of social contextual features in approaching the education of minorities, the paper analyzes the parental involvement effort and suggests changes in the ways future parental involvement efforts view parents and involvement. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/SM)

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Reassessing Parent Involvement: Involving Language Minority Parents in School Work at Home

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Parental involvement has been promoted by politicians and educators alike as the panacea to cure academic ills in the American educational system. Programs have been funded and structured to involve all parents in schools in ways valued by middle class parents to the exclusion of language minority families, their language, and their culture. These middle class based programs, which I argue are founded upon a cultural deficit approach to parenting, do not provide Latino and other immigrant families with the tools they need to help their children and empower themselves. This paper describes an ethnographic investigation of home based parent involvement as seen through the experience of a Costa Rican family in an African-American community in the northeastern United States. Using interviews, fieldnotes, and documents, this paper will detail a specific parental involvement effort initiated in a Latino home through a minigrant offered by the school district. Citing literature from research on the use of funds of knowledge in school and the analysis of social contextual features in approaching the education of minorities, I will analyze the parental involvement effort and suggest changes in the ways future parental involvement efforts view parents and involvement.

Generally schools have attempted to educate immigrant and language minority children in ways identical to majority children, assuming that they should accept the values of the American educational system without question and leave their past at the mythical golden door protected by the Statue of Liberty. As a result of these assumptions schools, on the whole, have been unsuccessful in improving the academic achievement of minority children. These children and their families at times have been ignored and called upon to participate in a system that does not promote or encourage their own family values. The children of these homes are often shuttled into English classes to Americanize them as soon as possible and the parents are silenced by the walls of an English bureaucracy that assumes they do not know how to support their children's education in appropriate ways (Auerbach 1989; Valdés 1996).

The silencing of immigrant and language minority families occurs at the level of the school administration as well as the classroom. Minority

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children are expected to learn English without question and without help. What happens in many instances is that there is more "not learning" than "learning" (Valdés 2001) occurring in the classrooms and the families are blamed for the lack of achievement of their children. Educators and politicians implicate the parents of these children as not being "involved" in the education of their children, in order to take the blame off of a system which fails thousands of children. This accusation takes the weight of teaching off the schools and lays it squarely on the shoulders of parents (Auerbach 1989) who are locked out of the educational system by their lack of knowledge of the dominate language—English.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the traditional majority culture based model of parental involvement views language minority parents with regard to their participation in the education of their children. I will look at the following questions: How do traditional models of parental involvement engage language minority parents in school activities in the home? What are the basic assumptions concerning what minority parents need to know or need to do in order to be involved in the education of their children? How can a model of parental involvement help all parents be involved in ways that promote their ways of raising their children and their home culture and prepare their children for schooling? What issues are most important in proposing any model of home based parental involvement for immigrant and language minority parents?

This paper describes the implementation of a small home-based parental involvement program in an elementary school in a large northeastern city where only English classes are offered to language minority children and little assistance is offered to the families of these children. The involvement patterns of a Costa Rican family are used as an example of the results of the parental involvement effort. Using ethnographic data including interviews, research field notes, and documents, I will attempt to answer the questions posed above.

Traditional Home-Based Parental Involvement and Language Minority Parents

Historically, models of parental involvement have considered a very narrow definition of what it means to be involved in schools in the context of the home. When educators and politicians proclaim that parents need to be more involved in the education of their children they are referring to a model of parent involvement based upon the assumption that parents need to do more school like activities in the home (Auerbach 1989; Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, and Amanti 1995). They believe that the best way for parents to show interest in their children's education is to read to their children (Lareau 2000), help their children with their homework (Kralovec & Buell 2000; Torres-Guzmán 1991), buy educational materials to use at home (Nieto 1985), teach children their ABCs (Valdés 1996),

and other school literacy related activities.

Parents are thus called upon to take on the role of being their children's teacher at home. This parent-as-teacher paradigm has been described as one of the most important roles of parents in the education of their children (Ada 1988; Nieto 1985). This paradigm positions parents as their children's first teacher and entails the responsibility of buying and using books, flashcards, and other educational materials to teach their children basic literacy skills. When parents do not adhere to the role of their children's first "teacher", they are seen as negligent and uncaring by the schools their children attend (Nieto 1985; Torres-Guzmán 1991; Valdés 1996). To rectify the problem of parents who do not adhere to the role of teacher, schools as well as government agencies (like Head Start) often implement programs which require mandatory parental involvement and parent education to teach parents how they should interact with their children. These programs take a cultural deficit approach to minority and language minority parenting. They see parents as entities that need to be fixed for the benefit of their children. Thus, parents' own interactional patterns are not valued, and they are taught to interact with their children in ways which are not valued by their home cultures.

Cultural deficit theory has been used to explain one of many possible stances taken toward diversity in education. This theory, proposed after genetic explanations for minority school failure were rejected, blames environmental factors as the cause of minority failure in schools. Jacob and Jordan (1996) explicitly examine the assumptions of cultural deficit theory with regard to minority family environments. They state that cultural deficit theory focuses on the home environment of minority children. Followers of cultural deficit explanations for minority failure assert that minority home environments do not provide sufficient intellectual stimulation for normal development of their children. Rampton, Harris and Leung (1997) provide a rubric which explains four different approaches toward diversity in education of which diversity as deficit is only one orientation.[1] For the purpose of this paper, I will only explain the cultural deficit orientation. This orientation, as he proposes, has its own specific views of culture, approach to language, views of research, descriptive concerns/focus, philosophical emphasis, assumptions about the world, intervention strategy and typical politics. This view is highly prescriptive and accepts only the majority norm as valuable. Its proponents advocate the linguistic and cultural assimilation of minority populations to the majority norms. Majority norms are positioned as neutral, objective, and standard.

[1] Rampton et al. (1997) include four different orientations towards diversity: diversity as deficit; diversity as differerence; not diversity, domination; and domination and diversity as discourse.

Problems with this paradigm

There are many problems with the current paradigm of home parental involvement efforts especially with regard to how it deals with the parental involvement of language minority families. In this section, I will discuss some problems with the traditional parental involvement paradigm including ways in which these programs decontextualize the involvement of different groups, devalue the home knowledge of minority groups, ignore cultural differences in raising children, and assume knowledge of the U.S. educational system.

Current home parental involvement models decontextualize the involvement efforts of minority parents (Torres-Guzmán 1991; Gonzalez et al. 1995). Using the model of parent-as-teacher, educators assume that all parents have the same abilities and knowledge concerning the school and the educational system in general rather than looking at the context of the student's household (Gonzalez et al. 1995). For example, whether the parents share the language of the school or even have formal education in the U.S. is ignored. Schools assume that it is the parents' responsibility to meet the school's demands without giving parents adequate tools to do so and without adapting efforts to meet parental needs.

Language minority parents are most often locked out of participation in school due to language differences. Due to limited proficiency in English, they can not always help their children with their homework but they can and do take an active role as monitors of their children's homework (Delgado-Gaitan 1990). This role is not explicitly acknowledged by schools because it does not specifically entail getting the homework assignment done correctly. Peña (1998) in a study of a dual language program, found that parents were not encouraged by the school, and parents felt that the knowledge they possessed was not valued by the school. A parent complained that "they [school personnel] don't even know that learning can happen in other places outside of the school" (114). From the parent's perspective, this implies that the schools do not utilize the knowledge and language the families have in order to educate their children; they just assume that the knowledge schools' possess is the best knowledge and only knowledge children should learn.

The assumption teachers make that all parents have the same educational level also contributes to parents failing to help their children with their homework. In the beginning of their children's education, language minority parents may have enough English proficiency to help their children with basic reading and math assignments but when their children get into higher grades they often can not help their children complete assignments (Delgado-Gaitan 2001). As their children learn more and more English, these parents begin to feel distanced from their Americanized children and can feel as if they live with strangers. Children in these homes often use their increased fluency in English to communicate with their other siblings in English and this positions them further and further away from

their parents.

The model of parent-as-teacher also fails to address cultural differences in raising children (i.e. differences in parent-child interactions and differences in the role of the parent at home) and implicitly labels minority cultures as deficient. Linguistically based cultural differences in child raising practices of minority groups have been noted in the literature (Heath 1983; Pease-Alvarez & Vasquez 1994). Much of this literature explicitly describes differences between language use in the homes of language minority children and the language use in the schools that they eventually attend. This literature also describes differences in how language minority parents interact with children at home.

Pease-Alvarez & Vasquez (1994) give explicit examples of how some language minority children are socialized to use language at home. These investigators show how these socialization practices are often in direct conflict with the ways schools want parents to interact with their children at home. They state that:

> Language use practices that originate in the school can also contribute to problems at home. In some cases, conflicts arise between parents and children over the values they feel are conveyed by language use practices that their children bring from the school into the home. For example Eastside parents disapprove of teachers who emphasize the individual rights of students over the collective rights of the family. From their vantage point, the critical discussion of family matters by children and teachers at school represents a threat to the family structure and parents' authority. They worry that teachers will encourage their children to reveal information that may threaten their family's security. (93)

Thus, schools want language minority children to share information that their parents do not want shared. Schools attempt to resocialize language minority children in ways which are promoted in majority middle class families and stigmatize the ways their parents socialize them.

Heath (1983) also shows how the ways that language minority families[2] interact with print are different from the ways that majority families interact with print. When looking at the differences between the white families of Roadville and the African-American families in Trackton, she observes that:

> Roadville family members consciously collect reading materials from themselves and for their children; they often talk about how they are going to learn how to do something by reading...Trackton residents have no such accumulation of reading materials; whatever comes into the community is usually either read, then burned or used for other purposes, or immediately discarded. There is no space or time assigned for reading; its occurrences follow the flow of daily social interactions...(232)

[2] In this case African American families are considered a language minority. They are considered a language minority because they do not share the linguistic socialization of majority middle class white families and because they use a dialect of English which is not accepted by schools as standard.

These communities place different value on print and the role it plays in their lives. Heath also describes differences in how parents talk to children from a very young age. Trackton parents tended not to talk to babies who could not talk fluently, while Roadville parents tended to talk to children in ways they would talk to adults even when the children could not talk or understand them. These differences, as exhibited by the Pease-Alvarez & Vasquez (1994) and Heath (1983) studies, are often used as more fuel against minority parents and their ways of raising children, rather than as cultural resources valued by the families and potentially valuable to schools.

In addition to the above problems with the parent-as-teacher paradigm, there is a supposition that parents know the U.S. schooling system. There is an implicit assumption that parents understand and can fulfill the expectations of their children's teachers. This is a faulty assumption because often language minority parents do not recognize what is expected of them in the American educational system (Valdés 1996). This is even so when the parents have attended school in the U.S. Immigrants and other minorities do not know that the schools want their children to know their ABCs before they enter school and they do not see this knowledge as part of what it means to be involved in their children's education. Valdés (1996) states that with the Mexican parents she investigated "the problem was that none of them were familiar with notions and views of success and achievement in American terms. They had no way of knowing that their own ideas and beliefs about what children should want and what families should help them achieve were very different from those held by mainstream persons in this country" (173).

The problems with traditional notions of home parental involvement discussed above make it important to propose alternative ways of involving language minority parents in homework and home activities which celebrate these families, take into consideration minority parenting styles, respect the linguistic socialization children receive at home, and contextualize involvement in ways that consider individual family characteristics, rather than prescribing one-size-fits-all activities that all parents should employ at home.

Proposing a Model of Home-Based Language Minority Parental Involvement

There has been an increasing amount of research into parental involvement in language minority families during the past fifteen years. A number of researchers have described what involvement efforts occur in language minority families and how schools attempt to meet the needs of these families (Delgado-Gaitan 1990; López, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha 2001; Valdés 1996). Researchers have proposed ways of helping language minority parents and their children, but the majority of the parental involvement programs are based on a cultural deficit model of parenting

that calls for transforming families in ways that destroy and devalue their culture. In this section, I will discuss how parental involvement programs can been seen as promoting a cultural deficit model of parenting. Then I will show how the funds of knowledge paradigm and social-contextual models proposed by Auerbach (1989) and Gonzalez et al. (1995) respectively are viable alternatives to the cultural deficit model. Afterward I will explain several important characteristics of the funds of knowledge paradigm and social-contextual models which should be considered in proposing home based language minority parental involvement programs that will help both parents and children.

In opposition to the cultural deficit orientation, researchers have given suggestions for family literacy that provide insights into the ways schools can be more culturally responsive to language minority families. Auerbach (1989) and Gonzalez et al. (1995), in particular, suggest alternative ways that schools can see and interact with families that can provide more contextualized and less demeaning interactions between schools and families. Through the social-contextual approach to family literacy and the funds of knowledge paradigms, educators can empower parents and children in their home activities rather than making them feel inferior and worthless.

As discussed above, many contextual factors which influence parents' abilities to help children with homework are not considered in traditional models of parental involvement. Auerbach (1989) describes the socio-contextual approach to family literacy as a model which examines the lives of families and provides literacy activities that are congruent with the literacy needs and goals of families. She suggests that family literacy programs should investigate home language use in order to build effective literacy programs. She states that "if educators define family literacy more broadly to include a range of activities and practices that are integrated into the fabric of daily life, the social context becomes a rich resource that can inform rather than impede learning" (166). This is also important to parental involvement. Without specific knowledge of home language use it is futile to require parents to help children with assignments. Also this calls for a contextualization of activities which are sent home. Rather than assuming that school knowledge is the only knowledge, when teachers know what types of language is used in their students' homes they can make more effective activities which both parents and students can be involved in.

The funds of knowledge research paradigm has many characteristics which are similar to those of the socio-contextual approach to literacy. Gonzalez et al. (1995) state that "funds of knowledge refers to those historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household's functioning and well-being" (447). Both paradigms, rather than making a broad assumption that the only valuable knowledge is obtained through schools, attempt to examine the context of the home as a potential resource that can be utilized in school literacy efforts. Literacy is envisioned not in the cul-

tural deficit manner as a unitary construct composed of skills learned in schools, but as a dynamic construct that is dependent upon the context of the homes and families of children as well as schools. This is not to say that it is not important to teach the types of literacy learned in schools but it does support a broader definition of literacy which includes the home context (i.e. language used at home, activities around literacy initiated at home) as important to literacy.

When using the above methods to examine parental involvement programs one can see that more attention needs to be paid to linguistic differences and programs need to provide multilingual support through translated materials, and bilingual advisors. One complaint language minority parents have concerning monolingual parental involvement efforts is that the language of choice is English. Even when letters, notes, and other parental involvement oriented literatures are sent home, they are in English. Parents with little or no English skills have to look to other family members and often their own children (Auerbach 1989) to translate materials.

Taking into consideration the educational level of parents involved in schools is also important. Many assignments sent home with children are decontextualized and require parents to have a high level of formal education in order to help their children. Auerbach (1989) suggests that family literacy programs help parents develop their own literacy which will in turn contribute to family literacy. This idea also applies to helping children at home. If parental involvement programs offer parents support and information concerning how they can improve their own level of education, they in turn can help their children.

Traditional parental involvement programs often ignore the knowledge that language minority parents possess. They focus on the skills the schools want the children to learn rather than including knowledge that is valuable to non-majority cultures and families. Gonzalez et al. (1995), Valdéz (1996) and others emphasize the importance of family knowledge to educating language minority children. Through looking at funds of knowledge in language minority homes, teachers conduct investigations in the homes of their own students looking at how the families survive and the types of knowledge and skills needed to function in these households.

Auerbach (1995) and Valdés (1996) emphasize that teachers need to consider child rearing practices of minority families. A program considering the child rearing practices of language minority families would not be quick to prescribe changes in the ways children and parents interact in these homes. There would be care taken to provide homework assignments which would foster parents' own ways of raising their children and provide interactions which would not only mirror those of middle class families. Parents thus could feel less threatened by schools and the education that American schools give their children.

Heath (1983) and Gonzalez et al. (1995) both promote the practice of assessing the use of print in the homes of their research participants. This

information is helpful in that it aids teachers in assessing the resources children have at home to increase their literacy. Using knowledge about home sources of print will allow teachers to take advantage of the ways print is used at home in order to make homework assignments that parents can truly be involved with and are familiar with already.

Thus, as shown above, the problems with traditional parental involvement programs can be remedied with an openness to changing the way parental involvement programs operate. By contextualizing involvement, addressing language issues, making appropriate home-friendly assignments, valuing parent knowledge, acknowledging child raising differences, and assessing home use of print, traditional parental involvement paradigms can shift toward a more inclusive future. Reassessing the values inherent in parental involvement attempts and implementing parental involvement that is unique to the families concerned can help to include language minority parents in school-initiated activities at home.

Lessons from the Lopez[3] Family

This section will discuss the implementation of a parental involvement program through a case study of the Lopez family, a Costa Rican immigrant family that lives in a large northeastern city. The purpose of this section is to describe how the parents in the family were involved in home-based activities with their children, as well as to illustrate what can occur when parental involvement efforts are guided by a cultural deficit theory of parental involvement. Current models of parental involvement do not examine the implications of their theoretical stance on how parents are involved, perceived, and empowered (or disempowered). This investigation critically examines what happened in a parent involvement mini-grant in order to look at the effects of a deficit model program from the grant writing process to the implementation of the grant. In the conclusion, I will suggest how changing from deficit model programs starting at the grant writing process would have the effect of empowering families.

Background Information

This research started not as an investigation but as a job opportunity. I accepted a part-time position as a bilingual tutor at a predominately African-American monolingual elementary school in a large city in the northeastern United States. I was hired to translate for Spanish speaking students at the school and to teach them basic literacy skills. The teacher pointed out Carlos, a seven-year-old second grade student, as the child who needed the most help.

Carlos had arrived in the United States mid-year from Costa Rica. He was in the first grade in Costa Rica but because of his age he was placed in

[3]All names have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality

the second grade in a monolingual English-speaking class where he received two to four hours a day of one-on-one English assistance outside his normal classroom. He entered the school with no oral or written proficiency in English and no ability to read or write in Spanish. Carlos was having difficulty learning to read in English and he needed to learn the alphabet as well as basic sight words. The ESOL teacher showed me his performance on a sight word test of approximately 75 words and Carlos was only able to identify three words for the first grade level. As a result of his reading difficulties he failed the second grade and remained in the second grade class during the second year I worked at the school.

Carlos' family, like most immigrant families, moved to the United States in order to have a better life and standard of living than they could have in Costa Rica. His mother, Esperanza, came from a poor family which farmed to make a living. She recalls having to leave school in the fourth grade in order to help the family farm so they could increase their income. Her husband was from a family that was better off financially than her own, and her husband was able to complete the twelfth grade in Costa Rica. They received money from her husband's family to move to the United States.

About three months after I began to work with Carlos, I went to his home to offer his mother English classes as well as to get her signature for a parental involvement mini-grant offered by the school district in order to "involve" the parents of Title I[4] students in their children's education. The mini-grant and accompanying parent involvement activities will be the main foci of this paper.

Parental Involvement Mini-Grant

The parental involvement grant was a natural outgrowth of my interest in working with Latino parents and children. I felt that involving parents in their children's education would provide parents with a voice and children with higher academic achievement in school. I became involved in the parental involvement grant writing process with the encouragement of the ESOL coordinator who had hired me as a tutor. She encouraged me to apply for the grant because she did not have time to apply for the grant, and she knew I was interested in getting the parents of her Latino students involved at the elementary school. The parental involvement grant writing process was a matter of filling in blanks on a form provided by the school district. They also gave suggestions for the types of activities to be included in the grant and provided a sample grant application. This section will describe the grant proposal detailing the suggestions from the grant proposal as well as the suggestions for evaluations of the grant outcomes.

The application for the parental involvement grant for Title I students provides a good example of the underlying theoretical stance of the school

[4] The US federal governement provides financial assistance to schools that have large numbers of poor and minority children through Title I grants. The schools are identified as needingextra educational expense by the economic status of their students' families.

district with regard to parental involvement as well as how parents are perceived by schools. From the beginning the Title I Parental Involvement Mini-Grant seems to be open to creativity in parental involvement activities. The cover letter stresses that "schools should propose unique activities that will engage parents and support student achievement." This seemsto be an open and inclusive grant that will embrace creativity and multiple parental involvement theoretical stances, but when the actual grant is completed it is apparent that the grant promotes only the traditional model of parental involvement.

The page entitled "Directions for Completing Applications" calls for the development of a grant by a team. This is ironic because the grant is for such a small amount of money ($500) that one person could spend the money on four or five parents in a very short time. They call for the involvement of a Title I teacher, a classroom teacher, and a parent of a Title I student in completing the grant application.

The grant also calls for "*activities* that will be undertaken *to help parents of Title I students to assist their child(ren) in the development of specific basic and advanced skills.*"[5] This phrase has undertones of deficit theory because it calls for helping parents to assist their children in developing skills which is more specifically related to the parent-as-teacher mentality of traditional deficit theories of parental involvement. The skills that are promoted do not draw upon parental knowledge thus parents need to be taught specific skills the schools want them to impart in their children.

The specific examples of suggested content of the parental involvement grant more explicitly promote deficit models of parenting and do not really provide space for the creativity and "uniqueness" elicited in the cover letter. Below are just some of the proposed goals "suggested" by the grant application which focus solely on reading activities:

> · Increase the amount of reading Title I students do (indicator: number of books or pages read)
>
> · Enable students to read more difficult texts (indicator: over the course of the year, students accelerate through the reading series).

These goals provide a narrow definition of what a parental involvement program could possibly do to involve parents. The grant's goals are based upon what the teachers and school district want from parents and portray the specific agenda of the school. The grant does not enable parents to feel empowered in their children's education and only provides help for the school's literacy goals.

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[5] Emphasis mine.

The proposed activities shown on the sample grant proposal also foster the mentality that the parent should be the teacher of their children and that they should be taught what the school values rather than looking to the parents' values. Some examples of how assistance activities might be described include describing activities in terms of:

> · the texts the students and parents would read with each other
>
> · the ways in which parents would read with students (e.g. pre-reading activities, the ways in which a parent would help when a student would have difficulty with a word, phrase, sentence; the question's (sic) students and parents would discuss after they had read part of the text)

These activities assume that parents can, should, and will interact with their children in certain ways around texts. They assume a middle class orientation towards texts and examples of alternative activities which are truly unique (like the Gonzalez et al. (1995) funds of knowledge emphasis) are not provided. Families are to be taught and fixed rather than understood.

The grant also required evaluation of the program's outcomes. Sample program evaluations are based on a quantitative and narrowly defined set of scales by which one can quickly obtain data rather than qualitatively obtaining information concerning participants' experiences. It is understood that there is difficulty in obtaining qualitative data on a short one year program in parental involvement, but if the grant is promoting itself as looking for unique ways to involve parents and really aims at receiving parent's opinions about what occurred with the grant funds, more emphasis should be made on interviews rather than questionnaires. Interviews, on the other hand, provide a way for parents to be more open and express their opinions concerning the program without being confined to answers on scales. Also, in the case of parents with low literacy levels, like Carlos' mother, questionnaires can be intimidating and ultimately misunderstood or not understood at all.

The sample evaluations contain questions concerning the frequency of activities the grant seekers wanted to occur in the home. The proposal asks educators to ask questions such as "How often did you work with your child on reading-related activities?" and "Rate on the scale to the right, how regularly you do each of the activities?" to determine how involved parents were with their children at home. Teachers are asked to assess the student's improvement in certain skills promoted or taught through the grant. These questions provide limited information, but did not really get to the question of how parents perceived involvement attempts. This should have been a large concern for a parental involvement program targeting low-income minority and language minority parents. An important part

of parental involvement with low-income parents and those who do not share the same cultural assumptions of the school is how they perceive the program attempts. This information can help educators provide more culturally sensitive parental involvement programs.

As can be seen above, the parental involvement mini-grant has a specific agenda to help families help their children in ways that are valued by the school. The mini-grant becomes a tool to implement change in the homes that will possibly improve the academic achievement of the children in the homes. The sample activities suggested by the grant do not attempt to incorporate activities which might bridge differences between the minority home and the majority school but are attempts to make minority families assimilate to the values and practices of middle class homes.

Approaching a parent with the "mini-grant"

When I began working at the elementary school, my supervisor suggested that I apply for a parental involvement mini-grant which was offered by the school district. I wanted to work in the language minority homes but had not had the opportunity to work with the families until the application for the grant was due. I then approached the family of Carlos, one of the Latino students who needed the most help, to receive his parents' participation in the grant.

When I went to Carlos' home, I was afraid. I did not know how I would be received by his mother. It was uncomfortable going to the home of a student and proposing activities which would attempt to change the home environment of the student. I walked the four short blocks from the school to his home and found a new mom and her three month old child waiting to greet me. She allowed me to enter her house and I hesitantly fumbled out a broken Spanish explanation of what a "mini-grant" was, which I explained as "un poquito de dinero" (a little money) that was supposed to help her help her child improve his performance in school. She agreed to participate in the grant and signed the form (which had her name hand printed at the bottom of the form) I had brought for her to sign and I left her home promising that I would be back to teach her English over the summer.

The forms she signed were all in English. I had filled out the forms with all of the information the school district required but there was no attempt by myself or the school district to translate the forms into Spanish or any other language so that the parents who were going to participate in the program could read what they were actually signing.

The summer following the grant application, we started the English classes but they lasted only about two months. They transformed from English classes to social events in which I was invited to the Lopez home to eat lunch, talk with Carlos' mother Esperanza, help Carlos read a book, and socialize with the family. Offering English classes was an activity the

sponsors of the grant suggested, and I felt that it would be a useful and desirable activity for this family especially since they had only been in the US for a few months.

I talked to Esperanza several times over the summer concerning how she could help her children at home so that they would perform better at school. I would bring books to show her what the school expected the children to be able to read. I also purchased flash cards to use to work with Carlos in order to help him improve his knowledge of basic sight words. Esperanza, to show her interest in her children's education, shared a book with me that she had brought from Costa Rica with her that had basic consonant vowel combinations in Spanish and rhymes that children could read to learn how to say the consonant vowel clusters. She would sit with her son with the book and ask him to read the words to her.

The school year after the summer English classes I continued to work in the same school. I spent more time working with all the Spanish speaking students in small groups in the hallways outside of their classrooms. I changed from a focus on repetition to a focus on reading whole stories. I purchased popular books, including books from the Arthur book series, to give students books with characters they had seen in their classroom readers and on TV. I also used flash cards to teach basic vocabulary and reinforce vocabulary they heard in the stories.

By the second month in the school year I received the grant and was told that the money would be deposited in a general school budget and budget codes were needed to withdraw the money. The program had to go on for about six months without funding due to the fact that the school budget person was sick most of the school year. Her replacement was only doing part of her job so the job of ordering supplies had to wait until she returned in February of 2001.

I continued to encourage home involvement in Carlos' family through weekly visits to Carlos' home. I would visit his home and bring children's books that I bought at the university bookstore. I would have lunch with the family, chat with Carlos' mother, and then sit down to read books with him and his younger brother Esteban. Rather than asking their mother to read to them, I would often model reading behavior with them. However, it was almost always in English with some questions in Spanish added in.

I worked with Carlos and his brother on several occasions. On most Saturdays, I would arrive at their home at 11:00 am and teach their mother English for two hours. Around lunch time I would finish the teaching session and sit and talk with their mom while she prepared lunch. After lunch I would sit in the living room with Carlos or Esteban and read Dr. Seuss books to them. I would encourage Carlos to repeat passages I had read, and I would point out words from the story he didn't know. He struggled with reading the passages by himself. When I worked with his brother I would mainly read the story aloud. Carlos didn't appear to enjoy the session in the beginning because he had a difficult time reading. His brother,

on the other hand, enjoyed being read to and would ask over and over to be read *The Cat in the Hat*. Carlos didn't like reading the same book more than one time. Sometimes I read alone with the children, and sometimes their mother would watch me read to them after she had finished cleaning up the kitchen after lunch. She could only read some basic words in English, and so she could not read along with us.

Sometimes Carlos and I would also go over flash cards. I would quiz him with flash cards that had both the pictures and words. He could identify some of the pictures by sight, but many times he could not identify the word or picture. He also had a hard time pronouncing the words and he would struggle with the activity.

My work with Carlos' family occurred over a year and a half period of time. I taught his mother and another woman from the community English. I also read to the two brothers and tried to promote reading and literacy activities in their home.

A Day at School

Part of what I proposed in my grant included holding meetings in order to inform Latino parents of school expectations and school literacy. A small casual meeting occurred in April of the year 2000 when parents were invited to come to the school, take a tour, and receive information concerning what the school expected of parents. I focused on Latino parents because I provide tutoring services for Spanish speaking children at the school. There was only one meeting because I did not receive the materials for the meetings until almost the end of the school year.

I met with two parents: Esperanza, the mother of Carlos, and Linda, a parent of a young boy who had just moved to the neighborhood that year. Carlos' mother reluctantly attended the meeting because she did not have a babysitter. However, I persuaded three students from a fourth grade class to provide babysitting services and rewarded them with stickers.

During the meeting I talked to the parents about the differences between education in Costa Rica and the United States regarding the expectations schools have of parents. I knew about the expectations because of 10 months of experience in Carlos' home talking to his parents and relatives. This previous contact with Carlos' family provided valuable information concerning where misunderstandings might occur between the Costa Rican homes and U.S. schools.

We started with a tour of the school, and I showed the two women where their children had their school activities. We went through the gym, cafeteria, ESOL classroom, homeroom classes, and library. We sat down and observed a first grade class for a little while even though they could not understand everything that was going on because of their limited English skills. I had set up a table in the library with educational materials that they could use to help their children attain higher literacy skills. I had flash cards, books, workbooks, pens, crayon, pencils, paper, and other materials

that they could explore.

We sat down, discussed their experiences in the school, and used some of the materials to make flash cards. In discussing their experiences with the school, they told me how frequently they came to the school to talk to teachers and why they came to the school. Both parents said that they attended school primarily for report card sessions twice a year and did not attend any other meetings the school planned for parents. The major reason they gave for not attending school meetings was their lack of English skills because all meetings and the fliers for the meetings were in English.

We worked to make homemade flash cards that they could use with their children at home. I explained the value of flash cards in helping their children learn new vocabulary as well as their spelling words. I also discussed how they could find materials at dollar stores or office supply stores to help their children in school.

I did attempt to get the parents to talk about their experiences at school because this is what I had proposed in the grant. I had learned that parents need to teach certain literacy skills to their children so they could succeed in American schools. In the beginning, I was unaware of alternative ways to involve parents that could be incorporated into a program that did not involve deficit approaches. As a result of my ignorance, I only taught parents how to make flash cards in efforts to help their children. I also fed them the information that the school wanted them to know so that they could potentially change to include the types of activities that the school wanted them to include in their home lives. I did not at that time know about the funds of knowledge approach to parental involvement and so I was not trying to tie parents experiences to the school and promote the parents own ways of teaching their children.

Interviews of Mini-Grant Participants

I must admit that I followed the parental involvement proposal to the letter and attempted to do exactly what they wanted. My initial goals reflected the same deficit mentality of those who had created the parental involvement mini-grant proposal, but in the process of reading more on parental involvement and taking a course specifically on parental involvement in schools I began to reassess the value of the activities I promoted in the households of the parents I worked with.

The following section looks at the interviews concerning the program. I performed interviews with Carlos and his mother Esperanza after the program. I transcribed the interviews in order to assess the activities which occurred during the time I spent in their home. I will discuss what questions I asked and what questions I should have or might have asked to provide a more detailed picture of what occurred in the parental involvement activities I promoted. I specifically want to draw a picture of how the participants in this case study perceived my interactions with them as someone trying to promote more involvement in their homes in school based

activities.

In order to get a picture of how I was perceived as an outsider coming into their home I asked Esperanza what she felt was my role in her life and the lives of her children. She told me that she thought that she learned a lot from me including how to speak a little English. She also commented that I helped to inform her concerning her children's school and kept her in contact with her children's teachers. She felt that she might not have been as involved if she had not had my help.

This passage shows how my interaction with the family was perceived as helpful. She tells me that she now knows that

> E: los padres tenemos que ayudarles a los niños, es que no solo los maestros tienen que que este ayudarles a los niños en que los padres también?? que nuestra parte, para que ellos aprendan mas y que es una obligación de nosotros estarlesayudando
>
> E: the parents we have to help the children, it is not only that the teachers have to help the children but the parents have to too, to do our part, so that they learn more and it is our obligation to help them.[6]
>
> (page 3, Esperanza interview)

It was clear from interviews and conversations that Esperanza understood what I was trying to implement through the parental involvement mini-grant. She understood that the school felt that the education of her children was not only the responsibility of teachers but also the responsibility of parents. Although she did provide the basic needs for her children, much like those described by Valdés (1996) she also began to understand that what she perceived as helping her children was not enough. While it was clear that this is what the school wanted, in hindsight it also possibly had the effect of disempowering Esperanza. She only had a fourth grade education in Costa Rica and because of her lack of formal education it was often difficult for her to help her sons. My parental involvement efforts in her home also possibly had the effect of letting her see that she could not really help her children in the ways the school desired. The only way she could help them is through people like me coming to help her.

One of the more obvious changes in Esperanza from the beginning of the year to the end of the year was her realization that she school expected her children to know a lot before they entered the school's doors. She understood that the school expected for her to teach her children their numbers and alphabet. In the beginning she thought that all she had to do was physically prepare her children for school by feeding and clothing them. This realization was both good and bad. On the one hand she gained the knowledge of what the school expected, but on the other hand she could not meet the school's expectations due to her own lack of education.

[6] I translated the interviews into English and my translation is included below the Spanish text.

If a different approach were taken such as looking into funds of knowledge in the family and trying to incorporate knowledge of the home with that of school it might have been possible to empower Esperanza and let her know that the knowledge she had, whether about housekeeping, childrearing, or other things, was valuable. Also there might have been other ways she could have interacted with her children, besides the ways I modeled for her through reading to the children, that could have been useful and helpful. But this would also take a change in the attitude and approach of teachers, administrators, and the curriculum of the school. A curriculum could include the experiences of parents as a way of empowering them and promote their help in home assignments.

It is also apparent from the interview with Esperanza that obtaining outside help when she could not provide it for her children was perceived by her as an important aspect of being involved. When asked whether in the previous year, when her son Carlos was retained in the second grade, she helped him with his homework she said:

> E: Nunca les ayudaba casi nunca, o sea yo trataba de de ver si podía ayudarles pero no podía ni entendí antes entonces a veces llamaba a Carolina o alguien para que me ayudará, el año pasado por eso le fue mal Carlos, no pude aprender bastante porque no le ayudaba y no tenía quien ayudarles
>
> E: I never helped them (Carlos and Esteban) almost never, or at least I tried to see if I could help them but I could not, neither did I understand thus at times I would call Carolina [her sister-in-law] or someone to help me last year, because of that Carlos didn't do well, he could not learn enough because I didn't help him and did not have anyone to help him.
>
> (page 5, Esperanza interview 5/5/01)

It became clearer that my presence changed how she perceived her job as a parent to children attending American schools. She would often tell me that the teachers in Costa Rica would get mad if you taught your child to read before they got to school because they felt parents could not get it right. The American school system was now calling on her to perform activities at home that she had previously taken for granted as the school's responsibility.

She did acknowledge that she began to help Carlos more with his homework since I had been at her home. She states,

> E: Cuando le manda este a hacer oraciones o entonces el a veces no no no sabe lo que significa una palabra entonces yo se la busca en diccionario, yo le ayudo a buscar en el diccionario... ya la escribe o si no ya el sabe buscar en el diccionario ya el aprendió
>
> E: When they send it to do sentences or even at times he does not does not understand what a word means then I look for it in the dictionary and I help him look for it in the dictionary... then he writes it or if not he looks for it in the dictionary and he learns it.
>
> (page 11, Esperanza interview 5/5/01)

I interviewed Carlos to assess how he felt life at home had changed since he had come to the U.S. I wanted in particular to find out if my attempts to increase home activities had actually resulted in greater numbers of school like activities and supplies at home. In an interview with him, I questioned him concerning books in his home before and after my involvement activities. He recalled that there weren't any books in English in his home when he came to the U.S. He stated that he later received books but mainly that he had received books within a few months of the interview. In the interview it appeared that there was some increase in the number of books Carlos' father brought to the home. It also became clear that Carlos' father did not know what reading level his son was at and thus brought home books which were well above Carlos' reading level. I also observed the types of books Carlos' father brought to the house and they were for fourth and fifth graders when Carlos was only in the second grade. Carlos' father was unaware of the importance of the level of the books and this was something he could not really assess either. His knowledge of English was extremely limited and thus he oftentimes brought books which were well above Carlos' reading level and thus not very useful in helping Carlos learn to read.

When Carlos was asked about whether someone helped him with his homework, he responded that his mother helped him. When asked what kinds of homework his mother helped him with, Carlos stated that his mother helps him with his spelling words. Both he and his mother recounted numerous times when they used a Spanish/English dictionary to look up words for his spelling assignments. They also looked up words while he was reading if he didn't know a word. Esperanza also recalled times when she did not know the word in Spanish and so she used a Spanish dictionary that I had given her to look up the Spanish definitions of some words.

The involvement pattern of Carlos' parents did show their love for Carlos and their interest in his education, unlike the assumption that minority parents do not value school. What was missing from the interaction between myself and my research participants was a more culturally sensitive approach to home activities. I felt that I helped the family in their knowledge of the school system and was sensitive to their culture in general but the activities and behaviors I attempted to encourage in Carlos' home were still concurrent with the view of changing the family structure, something Valdés (1996) carefully warns against.

There needs to be more research concerning how to implement activities which are culturally congruent and take advantage of knowledge obtained through funds of knowledge research. This research is yet to be done extensively. There needs to be more research on the funds of knowledge along in Costa Rican households with more sensitive classroom homework that specifically targets the strengths of language minority families can hopefully improve the educational outcomes of the children from those families.

Conclusion

As I attempted to show in this paper, traditional parental involvement programs base parental involvement on activities typically performed by middle class parents. They use the middle class model of parental involvement in efforts to involve language minority and all other parents. This model of fixing families and making them more like middle class families does not promote the strengths of minority families and denigrates the efforts these families make to educate their children.

Through looking at the application for a parental involvement minigrant as well as my own involvement efforts with a Costa Rican family, one can see that there still needs to be a lot more work done in order to fully utilize the potential of language minority families and have inclusive parental involvement that does not require an entire overhaul of the interactions these families have with their children. Rather than counting the numbers of books read, hours of interaction, and skills obtained, parental involvement programs need to find ways to make parents feel and know that they are valued and play an important role in their children's school life as well as home life. This can be achieved through critical evaluation of home involvement attempts and implementation of programs similar to the funds of knowledge paradigm that finds value in all homes. Thus, parents would feel more important to the education of their children in U.S. schools and parental involvement programs would be more successful in increasing the motivation of families to participate in schools. Focusing on families' goals rather than schools' goals has the potential of transforming the school experience and helping children succeed.

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