

Valuing and Connecting Home Cultural Knowledge with an Early Childhood Program

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The colorful sign on the cafeteria door welcomes families to the Week of the Young Child. The smell of coffee and *pan dulce*, or sweet bread, wafts throughout the urban elementary school. Mothers and fathers arrive with their preschoolers in tow

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and kiss them goodbye as their teachers take them to class. The adults get their snack, speaking quietly to other parents as they find a seat, and then turn their attention to the front. A five-day early childhood parent institute is beginning.

Why relationships are important

Working with families can be a rewarding experience for early childhood education teachers. To help children develop a healthy attitude toward school, relationships must be fostered between home and school. Bermúdez and Márquez (1996) indicate that a collaborative home-school relationship must be established early to make an educational impact. Inviting parents to participate in their child's education recognizes the "significance of the rapid learning that occurs before a child formally enters school" (Hurt 2000, 89).

Teachers as well as administrators need to take the time to build and

nurture relationships with children's families. "Reciprocal relationships between teachers and families require mutual respect, cooperation, shared responsibility, and negotiation of conflicts toward achievement of shared goals" is an NAEYC guideline for practice (Bredekamp & Copple 1997, 22).

When a community's language and culture are valued, families are likely to take a more active role in their children's education. The creation of a richer and more productive learning environment, diverse instructional strategies, and a more profound awareness of the role families, culture, and language play in education offers the rationale for linking home and school (Clark et al. 2002).

Our school

The elementary school sits in a south central Texas city, surrounded by one of the oldest public housing projects in the city. Most of the children enrolled are Mexican American (98.7 percent), and the majority is classified as economically disadvantaged (92 percent). English and Spanish languages and American and Mexican cultures are evident in the daily interactions and activities in the halls, classrooms, cafeteria, and surrounding community (Flores 2000).

In approximately five years the school has transformed itself from

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one of the lowest performing schools in the district to one with state-recognized status. In Texas, recognized status is the second highest tier a school can achieve under the state's accountability system. A key element in this success has been the implementation of a two-way bilingual program in which both the home language and the second language are used as mediums of instruction (Clark et al. 2002).

"This school is clearly a caring, bilingual community of learners, teachers, and parents. A metaphor to describe this school is *comunidad* [community]. In this *comunidad* lives a caring, supportive, bilingual *familia* [family]. *La familia* believes their children can succeed if given the proper nurturing in the native language and culture" (Flores 2000, 6).

Schools often give merit only to school knowledge and do not recognize the cultural knowledge of the community. Researchers acknowledge that often there is a mismatch between what is taught at home and the knowledge the school values (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg 1992).

Designing a parents' institute for the school

One of the school district's goals was—and is—to develop awareness of early childhood education within the entire community—among families, teachers, administrators, and citizens at large. The need for this awareness is underscored by a national survey that finds gaps in pub-

lic and parental knowledge about early childhood development (Lally, Lerner, & Lurie-Hurvitz 2001). The principal recognized such a gap at the school and began thinking about ways to close it.

According to the principal, "Parental involvement at the school had been the traditional type—parents helping in the office, making copies, and so forth." But she believed that family involvement must go beyond volunteering. In one study (Moreno & Lopez 1999), for example, Latina mothers participated in a wide range of school involvement, from basic obligations to school governance. Most Latino families want to participate in their children's education; they want only to be made welcome in school (Clark 2000).

The school's principal contacted us, three university professors, to assist the preschool teachers in developing nurturing relationships with families. A five-day parent institute during the Week of the Young Child was envisioned.

Assessing the funds of knowledge

Knowing the task at hand, we decided to start with what Moll and colleagues (1992) call "funds of knowledge," the social and linguistic capital that families bring to school. The institute was structured to guide parents and teachers in discovering how simple daily routines are beneficial for children's performance in school. We wanted the parents, the teachers, and the administrators to recognize that daily family



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activities constitute funds of knowledge that serve as important learning experiences for children. We also sought to show teachers that family interactions are part of formal learning. Our role was to help make a connection between what the preschool teachers were teaching at school and what the parents were teaching at home.

To build collaborative relationships, schools must allow families to share their expertise (Pérez 2001). Therefore, when selecting themes for the institute, we examined the home socialization patterns of the families in the school community. According to Delgado-Gaitán, the Mexican American home's social organization is "constructed around verbal and nonverbal interaction in day-to-day activities" (1994, 63), including such routines as buying and preparing food, washing clothes, watching TV, reading books, and talking to family members. The themes selected for the institute's five sessions reflect the socialization patterns of the families:

In the Morning/En la Mañana

Let's Go to the Supermarket/Vamos al Mercado

Afternoon Snack/La Merienda

Watching TV? Instead, Let's Tell a Story /¿Viendo la Televisión? Mejor Vamos a Contar un Cuento

The Weekend/El Fin de Semana

Invitations in English and Spanish were sent home with the children.

To stimulate interest, the principal also provided families with the institute's daily schedule and posted copies in the early childhood wing and other areas where parents gather. The school marquee also advertised the institute. Parents were encouraged to bring family members, neighbors, friends, and their young children, including infants and toddlers.

Seventy-three adults participated the entire week—mostly mothers but also some fathers who took time off from work to attend. The participants' levels of education ranged from elementary school to university.



All the early childhood education teachers and their classrooms (preschool and some kindergarten classes) attended, as well as university students enrolled in an early childhood education methods course. The principal, counselors, district early education coordinators, and community leaders also participated in many sessions.

The institute's daily schedule

The institute was divided into five two-hour sessions. Daily, we professors talked about how children learn from the activities they do at home, and we showed parents the concepts and skills acquired in each daily routine. During the second hour, the children came to the cafeteria to work with their parents and teachers on a special activity. Any child who did not have a parent in attendance was paired with another parent, a university student, or a teacher. All adult participants were asked to reflect by sharing their thoughts with the rest of the group on what they learned that day.

**Day 1
In the Morning/
En la Mañana**

We asked parents to talk about morning activities in sequence. We wanted them to discover the significance of what is involved in an activity and the concepts of order, time, and routine. The parents listed activities such as waking up, showering, dressing, eating breakfast, and brushing teeth. After creating the list, they told us what they thought their children were learning through the routines: communication, putting things in order, counting, measuring, hygiene, senses, colors, estimation, and weight—the same concepts and skills in

the early childhood curriculum.

With the children, parents and teachers participated in a joint breakfast activity that highlighted the senses of sight and taste. Children were encouraged to examine plastic bags filled with different kinds of cereal. They discussed taste and color and estimated the number of pieces in the bag. Later, while the children

enjoyed the cereal as a mid-morning snack, the parents asked questions using words that identify the sense used: ¿A qué sabe? (What does it taste like?), ¿Cómo se ve? (What does it look like?), ¿A qué huele? (What does it smell like?)

Day 2 Let's go to the Supermarket/ Vamos al Mercado

On the second day the number of parents increased from 15 to 23. The session focused on promoting language and literacy development by using vocabulary needed to shop at a supermarket. We emphasized naming specific items and noticing environmental print, and we provided a short description of healthy versus unhealthy foods for children.

During the joint activity, parents and teachers made a pop-up book with the children that focused on the routine of going to the store and on the items bought. The children could draw the grocery items or cut pictures from a store flyer. The adults helped the children distinguish between healthy and unhealthy food items as they made their book.

Some parents said they had not been aware that their children were actually writing when they printed the first letters of items they drew. Some parents took dictation from the children about the pictures they were drawing. Many were amazed at how well their children drew or cut and how well the children remembered their shopping experiences.

Day 3 Afternoon Snack/ La Merienda

By the third day parents felt more comfortable; some even brought more friends and neighbors, and the total number of participants increased to 28. The focus for the session was the afternoon snack, or what is commonly known as *la merienda*, in which *pan dulce* is

served with milk or chocolate. In addition to the identification and use of vocabulary specific to *la merienda*, we concentrated on shapes, manners, seasons, and temperatures. We also talked about the various kinds of *pan dulce* and the role of the baker as a community helper. We emphasized measurement as an important scientific literacy concept. We stimulated interest by demonstrating some of the chemical or physical reactions that commonly occur in mixing and cooking processes.

During the joint activity, everyone fashioned different shapes of bread from clay and matched them with outlines on paper. Parents also taught their children how to set the table using a place-mat template as a guide for cutlery, plates, and cups. The children learned vocabulary (particularly the names of the different breads), shapes, placing things in order, positional words, and prepositions.

During the *merienda*, a presenter read from a storybook that included colorful transparencies depicting the process of making bread. Everyone enjoyed the story with their *pan dulce* and drink.

Day 4 Watching TV? Instead, Let's Tell a Story / ¿Viendo la Televisión?

Many children spend endless hours watching TV. Many families are not aware that their children watch inappropriate programs. We asked parents to identify the shows they like to watch as a family and what they thought of their content. Most of their reported favorite programs, ranging from game shows to *telenovelas* (soap operas), are shown on the local Spanish television station. In discussing the events portrayed on television, the parents determined whether topics and programs were appropriate or not appropriate for young children.

We suggested alternatives to watching television, such as storytelling and playing. One presenter shared a parody of the folktale The Gingerbread Man, substituting a *marranito de jengibre*, (gingerbread pig). All were reminded that they and their family members have many stories to tell—that storytelling is important not only for children to develop early literacy skills but also to keep family traditions alive.

We discussed the elements of a story, including the characters, setting, motives, actions, and the end or conclusion. Using a stuffed toy as a character, parents were encouraged to write a story with a partner or a group. Parents followed the elements of the story and carefully watched their spelling.

When the children arrived, parents began to share their stories with the children and the teachers. Some groups chose to have one storyteller, other groups opted to have several members tell the story, and some parents chose to individually read the story to their child. Some storytellers even acted out their story with various toy animals; several embellished the stories with greater detail and action. This type of dramatic interpretation changes a reading task to an activity that promotes creativity, enthusiasm, pride, and interest in presenting stories well.

At the end of the session, parents said they felt more comfortable telling stories to their children and that it was not as difficult as they had thought. Many of them said they would now tell stories to their children at night rather than let them go to sleep in front of the TV.

Day 5 The Weekend/ El Fin de Semana

By the end of the weeklong institute, the parents were relaxed and eager to learn more. Attendance

soared from 40 to 65. We focused on family weekend activities such as doing laundry or washing the car. The session emphasized the vocabulary used in these activities as well as the fine motor skills required for such simple tasks as folding clothes. Parents learned how children could fold towels into different geometric shapes—squares, rectangles, and triangles; how to sort and classify fabrics by texture; and how to differentiate buttons by size, color, and number of holes. We discussed questioning techniques, and parents developed a set of questions to ask their children. For example, How can you turn a square into a diamond? How can you make a square out of a rectangle?

During the joint activity, parents were surprised to see how easily the children sorted and recognized the shapes. The children folded washcloths into small squares, rectangles, and triangles. Their parents were delighted to see them eagerly display their knowledge, and we were pleased to see the parents concentrating on asking critical thinking questions.

Discussion

The five days of the institute proved very successful for children, parents, and teachers. Rather than being a traditional family workshop in which the goal is to change how parents approach teaching at home, this institute's themes related directly to daily family life and

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linked to the community's funds of knowledge.

The use of Spanish in the delivery of the activity workshops acknowledged the linguistic and cultural features of the community as important tools in the mediation of school knowledge. During the first two sessions, we presented in English as well as in Spanish because some parents had indicated they felt more comfortable in English. However, when we determined that the participants were predominantly Spanish speaking, we realized that it is not unusual for individuals to claim a higher level of English skills, especially when they feel they may be judged incompetent. As the institute progressed, our own competencies in Spanish became evident to the parents, and they in turn shared Spanish words or phrases that were unfamiliar to us. This reciprocal learning process helped the parents recognize their abilities.

After the final session, we asked parents to reflect on what they had learned throughout the week. Many acknowledged that they now realize how their child learns. Parents showed amazement at their children's capacities for learning. They also recognized the importance of naming objects, giving clear and concise directions, and asking good questions.

The parents told us that we had validated for them the importance of their job as teachers at home. They recognized that daily activities offer many teachable moments and that the family can capitalize on those opportunities. They saw that children do not need expensive toys or learning materials. They also saw that as creative storytellers they could capture their children's attention and impart many skills and concepts.

During the sessions the early childhood teachers observed our interactions with parents and saw the parents working with their

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children. They came to appreciate the parents' abilities, creativity, and funds of knowledge. This experience allowed them to change preconceived ideas about the competency level of culturally and linguistically diverse parents. In addition, they were motivated by the parents' interest in the school, the teachers, the curriculum, and their children.

Many parents were so satisfied that they discussed how much they had learned with other grade-level teachers at the school. These conversations piqued the interest of these other teachers, and some of them stopped by to observe the sessions. Later the principal remarked that the upper-grade teachers were impressed with the experiential learning atmosphere; they said that if all early childhood teachers would teach in this manner, their job as upper-grade teachers would be much easier because the children would have stronger conceptual knowledge. These results point to endless possibilities in beginning to close the gap in public and parental knowledge about early childhood development and learning (Lally, Lerner, & Lurie-Hurvitz 2001).

Conclusion

This institute validated our belief that successful teaching practices at school must reflect teaching practices in the home. When there is incongruence between school and home, the child ultimately pays the price. We know that culturally and linguistically diverse parents are

interested in their children's education—the institute made this obvious. We just need to help families gain the basics of child development and learn everyday strategies that promote optimum benefits. Each day during this five-day institute, parents demonstrated their commitment to their children's education. Parents want their children to become successful in life and recognize the role of education in determining that success.

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