

Building Partnerships with Latino Immigrant Parents Shannon Fitzsimmons, Center for Applied Linguistics

Presenting new concepts to learners in meaningful contexts is an effective instructional strategy for all students (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). Qualitative and quantitative findings support that linking new academic material to students' prior knowledge, often gained through life experiences, is an especially effective feature of instruction for English language learners (ELLs) in Pre-K-12 schools (August & Hakuta, 1997; Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal, & Tharp, 2002; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2000). A major challenge for educators seeking to develop these conceptual links for ELLs has been the practical task of identifying prior knowledge that students may have without relying on assumptions or stereotypes (Civil, Andrade, & González, 2002). It is becoming increasingly clear that parents of ELLs can play a crucial role in this identification process.

A parent possesses invaluable insight into their child's prior knowledge because of the intimate and long-term nature of the relationship they hold with each other. A parent's thorough understanding of their child's household, community, and cultural environments also contributes to this expertise. Unfortunately, many barriers can exist between educators and parents of ELLs that inhibit sharing this understanding and applying it to the classroom. Roughly 80% of ELL parents are Latinos and more than 25% are immigrants (Kindler, 2002). The oft-held perception by educators that Latino immigrant parents hold low educational aspirations for their children or are uninterested in participating in the children's education is therefore one of these barriers (Azmitia & Cooper, 2002; Moles, 1993).

Contrary to such perceptions, emergent findings from the growing body of relevant research point to high aspirations on the part of Latino immigrant parents for their children's educational attainment and an interest and willingness on the part of these parents to become involved in the schooling of their children. This brief will synthesize lessons learned from CREDE projects and discuss the potential for strengthening the role of Latino immigrant parents in the education of their children.

High Aspirations

One longitudinal study, conducted from 1989–1995, sought a better understanding of how parents' aspirations for their children evolve over time. The study tracked the academic progress of 81 children of Latino immigrants, who were enrolled in ESL or bilingual instruction. Researchers examined parents' beliefs about their children's education from Kindergarten through the first semester of Grade 6 using phone interviews conducted each semester, three face-to-face interviews, annual teacher ratings of student academic performance, and school records. At the outset of the study, the majority of parents held aspirations for their children to pursue education beyond high school. These aspirations remained largely constant throughout the study. Further, these hopes did not change in relation to the number of years parents were exposed to U.S. culture and were not related to measures of student performance. That is, neither the challenges of immigrant life in the United States, nor the children's academic performance in school affected parents' educational hopes for their children (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001).

Evidence from CREDE Project 3.3, "Navigating and Negotiating Home, School, and Peer Linkages in Early Adolescence," supports this finding. The majority of Latino parents who took part in the project, from June 1996 to July 2002, were immigrants to the United States. Sixty-six percent of the participating Latino parents reported aspirations for their children to attend college (Azmitia & Cooper, 2002).

Facilitating Involvement

Latino immigrant parents tend to be interested in participating in their children's schooling. That willingness, however, does not immediately translate into involvement. Rather, participation seems to be contingent upon schools creating opportunities that are readily accessible to Latino immigrant parents (WestEd, 1998). Schools facilitate access when educators and parents share an understanding of what "involvement" entails and parents feel prepared for such participation.

As part of several CREDE projects (see inset), researchers developed and refined strategies for promoting the involvement of Latino immigrant parents. Successful strategies included 1) use of Spanish in addition to English to create a comfortable cultural setting; 2) development of *collegial* relationships between parent, educator, and researcher; and 3) careful consideration of site logistics (e.g., place and time of meetings, provision of childcare).

CREDE Projects Involving Voluntary Participation of Latino Immigrant Parents:

- Project 3.3: "Navigating and Negotiating Home, School, and Peer Linkages in Early Adolescence"
- Project 3.4: "Developing Immigrant Parents' Computer Literacy in Partnership with Students' Learning"
- Project 4.2: "Linking Home and School: A Bridge to the Many Faces of Mathematics"
- Project 4.3: "At-risk Preschoolers' Questions and Explanations: Science in Action at Home and in the Classroom"

Implications for Instruction

Parent, educator, and researcher collaboration on CREDE projects revealed knowledge held by Latino immigrant families that could be used immediately to contextualize classroom instruction. Educators participating in Project 4.2, for example, visited student households where they discovered that family members knew a great deal about cultivation and construction. Based on this discovery, teachers developed thematic units about gardening and “dream homes” that incorporated cognitively challenging, grade-level appropriate mathematical concepts. Because assignments involved subject matter about which family members were knowledgeable, they supported student work at home (Civil, Andrade, & González, 2002).

Data from Project 4.3 made apparent the nature and frequency of science-related conversations between Latino immigrant parents and their children. When researchers shared the content of these conversations with teachers, many educators utilized children’s questions to develop lessons (Callanan, 2002). One teacher, for example, derived a lesson on plant nutrition from a question that a student asked his parent. Educators could directly gather such information (in this case conveyed from researcher to teacher) during parent-teacher conferences, home visits, and parental surveys.

Conclusion

Carefully planned collaboration between parents and educators can improve instruction for ELLs. Findings show that Latino immigrant parents, whose children are often ELLs, hope their children attain high levels of education and want to participate in that process. CREDE projects serve as examples of how to promote such involvement and translate it into meaningful instruction. Below is a list of references and additional resources on research and practices for building relationships between teachers and Latino immigrant parents.

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Additional Resources

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