Why Are We Still Blaming the Families in 2019?

Over the past decades, researchers, policymakers, and educational leaders have concurred that family engagement is critical to student achievement. Family engagement results in better attendance, increased academic performance, and improved behavior at school and at home (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Notably, family engagement helps reduce the achievement gap of students from different racial groups and socioeconomic backgrounds (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006). Teaching standards require teachers to understand how students’ learning is influenced by family and community values, prior learning, talents, and culture to tie instruction to students (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013; TESOL International Association, 2017). Given the impact that this collaboration has on students’ success, it is disappointing that researchers have continued to report that teachers receive very little preparation on how to work with families and develop parent and family relationships.

Consistency With What We Knew 17 Years Ago

In 2002, the International Reading Association (now the International Literacy Association) published a position statement titled Family–School Partnerships: Essential Elements of Literacy Instruction in the United States. The statement underlined that most educators in the United States received very little preparation in working effectively with families. It cited several studies noting that teacher education programs “neither provide student teachers with information about and supervised experiences in working with families, nor expect them to demonstrate relevant competencies and skills for certification” (International Reading Association, 2002, p. 2). Fast-forward to 2019, and the concerns persist. Seventeen years after the publication, the organization has continued to recognize that family involvement is critical to literacy development (International Literacy Association, 2018).

Parents’ Motivation, Expectations, Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs

A number of studies have examined parents’ motivation, expectations, attitudes, values, and beliefs as they relate to language learners’ literacy development (Brooker, 2002; Carter & Chatfield, 1986; Goldenberg, 1987; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Mulhern, 1997). Across all of these studies, two findings are notable:

1. Parents of language-minority children value their children’s formal education and are very committed to helping their children succeed academically.
2. Schools tend to underestimate parents’ commitment and ability to contribute to their children’s literacy development.

In addition, other studies have found that literacy is not absent in the home settings of minority students, but the purpose and practice of literacy are approached differently (Huss, 1995; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Volk & de Acosta, 2001) than at school (Mulhern, 1997). Even though there is evidence that parents of language-minority students have the motivation, ability, and commitment to support their children’s literacy development, the cultural model (Valdés, 1996) and deficit view (Valencia, 2010) continue to be used as an explanation for the academic failure of these students. In spite of evidence to the contrary, these arguments maintain that parents do not value education, do not prepare their children well for school, or are not involved in their children’s education (Valdés, 1996).

Opportunities for Interaction With Families

Despite the efforts made by schools and teacher preparation programs through professional development to clarify cultural differences and provide a forum for educators to discuss misunderstandings among home, school, and community (Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, 2006), teachers still feel unprepared to work with families. A literature review...
conducted by Evans (2013) cited three reasons: mismatch between the cultural values and perceptions of the teachers and students, limited opportunities presented in teachers’ preparation programs to interact directly with students’ families and their communities, and mixed messages received in teachers’ field experiences about family–school partnerships.

The Project
Teaching about language and power is huge, complex, and messy (Christensen, 2017), but for the past 19 years, I have been working diligently in helping teachers understand relationships between home and school. My hope is that teachers will challenge the dominant view of the impact that parents have on their children’s education, gain confidence in working with parents, and see parents as partners of collaborative meaning within the educational process. For this purpose, I created a child, community, and context study as a signature project for a graduate class for practicing teachers who were returning to college to obtain an English as a New Language endorsement. (This endorsement certifies that educators are prepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students and consists of 20 credits of coursework, including a field experience. Unfortunately, several states grant teachers a teaching certificate without preparation to work with the growing culturally and linguistically diverse population attending our schools.)

The project aims to help teachers in the field become comfortable and effective working with parents by involving teachers in an inquiry-driven project expanding the knowledge they have acquired through readings and asking them to reflect on preconceptions they hold about parents, children, and community. The child, community, and context study takes place over 10 weeks and focuses on culturally and linguistically diverse students. Four components make up the study, and as the title indicates, it takes into consideration multiple viewpoints in different contexts. The community/cultural observations component requires visiting and observing the neighborhood of the selected students. The community assets component invites teachers to interview people who live and work in the community, and the child observation component prompts teachers to observe students’ interactions inside and outside the classroom. Finally, the home visit component brings teachers into students’ homes, and in this column I will focus on parents during the home visit.

Similar to the findings in Evans’s (2013) study, a small number of teachers in the program (11%) expressed confidence in conducting home visits, and only 8% reported understanding or having knowledge of drawing on community cultural resources to support learning. Some teachers were initially hesitant and fearful about stepping into students’ homes, as Geneva (all teacher names are pseudonyms) noted in her final report: “When I first heard that we were going to be doing home visits, I was filled with a sense of dread. I was intimidated and felt like I would be bothering the families.”

The impact of the conversations began to take on a transformative potential. In the narratives constructed, several themes emerged, and I have chosen specific excerpts from teachers’ reports in 2017 to illuminate teachers learning about their personal perceptions, students’ literacy experiences at home, and changes made in classroom practices to better support and respond to the students and their families.

Changes in Personal Perception
As the teachers engaged in the project, they reflected on their own changes in the ways they perceived students and their families.

As an educator, I envision my students living in a neighborhood filled with love, support, and community. As I was driving through the neighborhoods of my students, the reality of their lives struck me. There was not a mom and dad playing in the backyard with their children and friendly dog. There was not a friendly mailman waving hello to everyone whom passed. This [false] reality is based upon our middle-class sitcoms portrayal of the perfect neighborhood; whereas the neighborhood I visited consisted of working class families whom live in trailers filled with multiple families. Through observations of my students and their community, as well as discussions with fellow community members, my skewed depiction of the lives of my students was clarified into a realistic perception. (Teresa, final report)

I included this comment not as denigration of the teacher but as an example of how a normalizing perspective based on middle-class values does not take into account the complexity of family arrangements and their economic organizations.

Another teacher working with high school students recognized that a deficit framing of minority parents distorted his images of the parents:
I realized that I had a biased opinion about the involvement of language learner families in schoolwork. I assumed that because they were classified as language learners they didn’t spend time at home working on homework or practicing skills on their own, because they couldn’t do it well. What I learned through my home visit with [student’s name] is that the family spends a lot of time making sure their children complete assignments and practice other skills at home. (Anthony, final report)

In another instance, a teacher wrote that before visiting the home of one of her students, she had been “warned” by school personnel that the relationship between the home and the school had been strained. Administrators and teachers frowned upon the family’s annual trip to Mexico, and the mother knew this well. During the visit, the teacher learned that the family traveled to Mexico every year to help the grandfather. She also learned of the rich cultural experiences this student garnered from the trip. The grandfather’s house is in Coyoacán, where Frida Kahlo lived; thus, the student had access to murals and famous sites. This experience helped the teacher understand how ideological barriers of stereotypes and inequalities applied differently to families according to their economic and linguistic status. She pondered whether the school would have frowned on this opportunity to visit Mexico if the family pulling the student out of school had a different socioeconomic status.

All of these scenarios and insights are powerful reminders of how imperative it is to give teachers opportunities to engage in evaluating and noticing the ways in which social policies and practices reflect the values and actions of the dominant group while stereotyping and marginalizing other groups (Wells, 2002).

Insights Gained About Home Literacy

Thoughtful conversations with parents allowed teachers to capture how invested parents are in their children’s education. Parents shared their commitment to help because they wanted better opportunities for their children, as expressed in this excerpt: “I want more opportunities for my children. When I came to the States I was given a shovel, not an opportunity for education. I want something different for them” (Sam, final report).

Teachers repeatedly heard how parents wanted their children attend college after high school. During a home visit, a teacher discovered that whereas the student really wanted to be a soccer player, he knew his father wanted him to go to college; he respected this because, as he mentioned, “that is why my parents came here [the United States].” During this exchange, the father expressed his desire to help his child read more to improve his reading skills. On another occasion, a mother commented that her daughter loves to read and loves animals and wants to be a veterinarian. Both parents agreed that she would be great in such a capacity and added, “We want her to attend college because neither one of us have.” They emphasized that the daughter needed to be better at math and put more effort into her studies.

Reading was emphasized both by parents and teachers, and even though those practices may look different at home and at school, teachers learned to recognize these differences.

When it comes to home literacy, I learned that the student is encouraged to read at home...and that oral literacy is a strong tradition in the family, as they prefer to pass information in the form of songs and conversations. (Katherine, final report)

Adjusting Curriculum to Support Students’ Learning Experiences

Teachers’ opportunity to meet families and listen to the goals they had for their children began to establish a more collaborative approach to instruction. The teachers took the knowledge gained from these conversations to shape a program of instruction that met the students’ needs and expanded their possibilities. The visits with parents provided opportunities for educators to explore and extend their understanding and to support the development of practices that valued and built on the students’ prior knowledge and strengths.

I cannot create a word problem based around attending a [university] football game because most [of my students] haven’t had the experience, but I can create a word problem based on attending a school camp because...they can relate and visualize the problem. (Diana, final report)

Building on the knowledge of community and a deeper understanding of students’ home lives, culture can be a driving factor in instruction. This knowledge translated into reflecting on the importance of including culturally relevant texts because they not only engage students but also build community in the classroom. After
a home visit, a middle school teacher realized the importance of incorporating authors such as Sandra Cisneros because “these texts would allow my students to see themselves reflected in the literature.”

Because of newfound knowledge from parents, teachers made fundamental changes in their curriculum. In one instance, conversations with a mother led the teacher to understand why her male student never volunteered to perform classroom jobs. This prompted the incorporation of Mexican and Mexican American women’s biographies, thus helping the student understand that classroom jobs are not gendered. Yet another teacher learned that even though one student did not like to read, he loved to listen to his mother reading aloud Bible stories and jokes. This information prompted the teacher to move beyond rigid structures and “load him up with popular audiobooks in his AR reading level on an iPod.”

Another teacher touched on the importance of acknowledging differences:

As the year continues to progress we will be planning a cultural project where all the students will be able to share their differences so they can gain a better understanding of how they all come from different backgrounds. My hope is to incorporate this lesson into our informational writing and at the end of their research the students will be able to present their projects...students are excited to share their own histories with the class. (Mary, final report)

**Some Final Thoughts**

Similar to the findings cited in the studies at the beginning of this column, teachers in the program reported feeling unprepared and not confident in working with the families of culturally and linguistically diverse students. They felt scared and worried about how they would be received. This project posited teachers as active learners, encouraging them to make changes and adjustments using their professional judgment, thus recognizing that every teacher starts in this journey at a different level. This inquiry-based approach helped inservice teachers move beyond the knowledge they had and to the knowledge held in the communities, therefore deconstructing and constructing power relationships as they often transpire at schools. By visiting the homes of their students, teachers were able to see each parent as a person with knowledge, perspectives, and experiences to be shared rather than someone who needs to be helped. This is the point where the power relationship changes and suddenly the teacher recognizes the parent as an equal participant in the student’s education. The teacher’s commitment to make this a sustainable event is therefore much higher.

By the end of the experience, the teachers’ commitment was fervent. Seventy percent of the teachers expressed confidence in conducting the home visits. Moreover, teachers pledged to continue to implement the approach in the following school year and beyond.

We left with knowledge about our students that we would never have been able to learn had we not ventured beyond the walls of our school and into the living rooms of our students. I will make a point of doing more of them [home visits] in the future. (Geneva, final report)

**REFERENCES**


Huss-Keeler, R.L. (1997). Teacher preparation of ethnic and linguistic minority parental involvement and its relationships to children’s language and literacy learning:


Erratum

On page 273 of the September/October 2018 issue of The Reading Teacher, the incorrect photo printed in Claudia Peralta’s department editor blurb. Her correct photo (see above) has been corrected in her blurb in the online version of that column, “Teaching Contentious Books Regarding Immigration: The Case of Pancho Rabbit” by Scott Beck and Alma Stevenson.