

Creating a Partnership with Parents of ELL Students in Order to Promote Increased Parent Participation

Abstract

The question that drove our research was will establishing partnerships between parents of ELL students and teachers increase parental participation and involvement at their children's school. Three different methods of gathering data were implemented: surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Our findings determined that parents wanted to be active participants.

This participatory action research (PAR) investigated the challenges that parents of ELL students encounter upon supporting their child or children in our public schools. It is expected that in the next four decades the United States will experience continued growth in ethnic and racial diversity (Passel & D'Veira, 2008). Our participatory action research team consisted of four graduate students from Florida International University majoring in Urban Education. The question driving our research was will establishing partnerships between parents of ELL students and teachers increase parental participation and involvement at their children's school. The investigation aroused a critical perspective as all involved began to understand how social structures influence and shape our lives.

Jeynes (2012) found that there is a positive relationship between parental involvement programs and students' academic achievement. These results were applicable to both elementary school students as well as secondary school students although most of the studies involved elementary school students. The meta-analysis found the following programs to have statistical significance in improving student achievement: shared reading programs, emphasized partnership programs, communication between parents and teachers programs, and checking homework program. Head start programs and ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching programs were effective but not to a statistically significant degree.

The literature voices the importance and challenges of building teacher-parent partnerships. The following two studies list some of the obstacles faced by teachers and parents. Lazar and Slostad (1999) argue that parent-teacher partnerships are made possible when teachers and administrators take on the responsibility. The authors argue that teachers, administrators, and schools need to take on an active approach for addressing parental involvement instead of waiting for parents to become involved or seeing parents' lack of involvement as lack of interest in their child's education. Their research identified numerous factors that stand in the way of parent-teacher collaboration. Among those factors are social-historical factors that date back to the 1800s when immigrant children were cautioned not to replicate their parent's language and customs (Lazar & Slostad 1999). These practices separated school and home and contribute to low parental involvement. The authors also make note of teacher education programs that lecture the importance of parent-teacher communication but do not provide student practice. Another obstacle noted by the researchers is the school system that sets clear boundaries for teacher-parent interaction. For example, the authors note that teachers are not rewarded for their efforts in communicating with parents. Furthermore, parents are

usually excluded from decision making processes regarding educational programs or hiring of staff at the school. These obstacles stand in the way of a partnership.

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) took place at a K-8 center, located in an industrially mixed neighborhood in Miami-Dade County, known as the City of Doral. The students that participated in the study are a group of fourth graders all of them in ESOL levels I and II. The parents of said students are also non-English speakers.

The investigation entailed three different methods of gathering data: parent survey, interviews, and focus groups led by parents. Data was gathered by a homeroom parent that called and had face to face interviews. The interviews then took place via face to face meetings in the morning when parents came to drop off their students, because of limitations and logistics, several interviews took place by telephone in the evenings. Finally, the focus groups were organized by the researchers and facilitated by the parents. They took place on Saturdays on a bi-weekly basis at a location intentionally selected by the parent and outside the school campus.

Our findings determine that parents wanted to be active participants in their children's educational process. They simply need the tools, within their own language and comfort zone, so they can also be engaged and grow along with their sons and daughters. We found that they brought with them intense commitment and motivation. The surveys that we utilized to gather the information that was needed were created by three ESOL teachers and one graduate student in the field of urban education. After much thought, discussion, and collaboration, the questions were narrowed down to five. These were then asked in face-to-face interviews by a homeroom parent. A total of twenty interviews were conducted and they were all Spanish speakers. The information obtained during said interviews rendered the following results: 50% Almost Always attend school functions, 45% stated language was an obstacle in their participation, 35% stated the district portal is accessible, and almost all request a bilingual office employee, information provided in Spanish, and more teacher-parent interaction with an interpreter.

Our research indicated that parents are willing and actually quite anxious to become a more integral part of their children's learning and school environment, if they did not feel that language was such an impediment in the process. According to the survey presented to parents, most of them requested information to be provided in Spanish, in order for them to have to the opportunity to participate or to simply be aware of all that was taking place in their children's scholastic life.

Additionally, parents wanted their children to do well on the FCAT test but needed to learn how to help, what resources were available, and how to access them. Clearly, the parents wanted to be active participants in their children's educational process. They simply need the tools, within their own language and comfort zone, so they can also be engaged and grow along with their sons and daughters. We found that they brought with them intense commitment and motivation.