

# **Testing the Waters: Facilitating Parents' Participation in Their Children's Education**

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## **Abstract**

Parent participation in the schooling and education of children is an essential ingredient for achieving academic success. This paper, using a model proposed in 1995, reports on a pilot, hands-on study aimed at facilitating increased parent involvement in a multi-ethnic elementary school in California. The participatory research process included two interventions designed to increase parents' involvement and surveys and interviews of the teaching staff and a selection of parents. Research was conducted in the three languages common to the school: English, Spanish, and Urdu. It is argued that to achieve success and excellence in such work the perspectives of parents and teachers must be considered, and the development of appropriate and acceptable participation strategies, as challenging as this may be, must be undertaken. Finally, the factors of language and culture in various forms must also be considered.

## **Introduction**

Typically, the family is viewed as critical to the development and education of all children (see Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The family is not only the institution in which children have their earliest education (Cremin, 1991), but also the institu-

tion in which they develop their educative styles (Leichter, 1973). Moreover, the family tends to be the most important mediating agency for all other educative institutions, including the schools. If schools are to be their most effective as measured by academic achievement and excellence, then the connections of schools to families must be addressed. However, increasing parent (or family) participation in schools, like achieving excellence, is neither easy nor guaranteed.

In the past two decades this issue of parent participation and academic outcomes has rightfully garnered increased attention. The issue has been the subject for debate, research, policy, and a goal of practice. Common to the debates, research, policy, and practice is the belief that parents' involvement benefits their children's achievement in the schools (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1992; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999). In general, the view is that the quality of the connections between parents and schools influences children's and adolescent's school achievements and that "good" parent-school links have positive benefits for everyone involved. Earlier, Schorr (1988) argued that the most meaningful efforts to improve schooling (and outcomes) should be based on the view that children are parts of families, and families are parts of communities. Thus, families and communities have to be connected to the schools for children to achieve the outcomes expected of them. In a more recent study based on the National Education Longitudinal Survey, it was found that both structural and process attributes of family (and community) social capital were key factors affecting high school students' achievement (Israel, Beaulie, & Hartless, 2001). That is, family related structural factors, such as family size, number of siblings, etc., and family process factors, including the quality of the parent's involvement in their child's learning, enhanced achievement. Recently Park (2001) found that parental involvement had both direct and indirect effects on achievement of students of different ethnic backgrounds. In other cases, arguments are presented as practical strategies for enhancing parent involvement (Davis, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

In this debate, others challenge the basic assertion, claiming that academic outcomes are not a direct effect of parent's involvement. For example, Griffith (1996) tested the belief that the climate of schools impacts parent involvement and the very success of the schools. He goes on to argue that concepts integral to the understanding of parent involvement are the expectations of parents, teachers, and administrators for the level of inclusion of parents and the desired effects of such involvement (Griffith, 1996). In their article focused on parental involvement, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) argued that the models and methods for understanding and impacting parental involvement in children's education need to refocus their questions. They argue that the most important questions are WHY parents choose to become involved and WHY their involvement, once underway, often positively influences educational outcomes (1995). They offer a specific

causal model that suggests that parents become involved primarily because:

- (a) they develop a view of their own role that includes participation;
- (b) they develop a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed;  
and
- (c) they perceive opportunities or demands for involvement.

In this causal model, parents choose specific forms of involvement and utilize various mechanisms through which involvement influences outcomes, specifically skills and knowledge and personal sense of efficacy.

The Hoover-Dempsey/Sandler Model focuses on the significant elements in parents' decisions to become involved in their children's education, their choice of specific involvement forms, and the influence of their involvement on the educational outcomes of their children. They identify parent involvement as a dynamic process that occurs over time. Further, they suggest that parental, school, child and societal (community) contributions taken together are the involvement process. They suggest that practical efforts to improve the process and outcomes may be best served by cooperative efforts to "adjust specific points of intersection and varied contributions to the system" (p.329). They continue, saying that efforts to improve participation are ". . . probably poorly served by blaming (e.g., 'parents just aren't interested,' 'schools don't care') or uni-dimensional approaches intended to create 'more involvement' " (p. 329). This model is more than a theoretical construct; it also contains suggestions for specific points of entry into the process of involvement and outcomes. The model should be able to serve both those interested in research and in practice related to parent involvement.

The following is a report of a case study that accepted the implied invitation to enter into the testing of specific elements of this model and process. The participatory action research case study reported here was organized as a collaborative effort with a K-6 elementary school and was carried out in early 2001. This study was intended to be the initial step to assess specific elements of the parent participation model in one school while experimenting with several mechanisms for parental involvement. In addition, attention was given to the teachers' perceptions of parent participation, the match between parents' and teachers' perceptions, and the general school climate.

Our inquiry was focused on the "problem" of parent involvement, on a process of inquiry (i.e., how parents and teachers view parent participation), and on an assessment of interventions intended to facilitate parent participation. This study sought to address questions related to parents' decisions to become involved, their construction of their role, and the general opportunities and demands for their involvement. A second variety of questions focused on parents' choices of how to be involved, along with invitations and opportunities for involvement from the school and teachers. A third area of interest was the teachers' construction of

parent involvement and the fit between parents' involvement and school/teachers' expectations.

## **Elm Street Elementary School, Wheatley<sup>1</sup>, CA**

Elm Street Elementary is located in the city of Wheatley, California, a rural city with a year 2000 population of approximately 45,000. Wheatley residents include a mix of locally employed professionals, of commuters who work in nearby urban areas, and a large percentage of low-income, predominantly Latino, residents who work in warehouses, industrial firms, and as farm workers. In Wheatley, 73% identified themselves as White, 26% as Hispanic (predominantly Mexican), and less than one percent as from other ethnic groups. The median household income is \$31,671, nine percent higher than the county average of \$28,866. Census figures estimate that 9% of the city's residents live below the poverty line and 18% had not earned a high school diploma.

Elm Street Elementary, built in 1916, is the oldest school building in the Wheatley School District. It is situated in a neighborhood that includes stately mansions built in the late 1800's and early 1900's, along with drab apartment buildings and run-down bungalows. It is a kindergarten through sixth grade school for over 400 children, with 19 full-time teachers. The teaching staff is predominately female and Anglo (with six Latino teachers) and has an experience base that ranges from 22 years to 1 year. None of the teachers live in the neighborhood of the school. In 2001 the average class size was 21 students. The school scored very low on the recent State of California's Academic Performance Index (API), with a score of 3 on a scale of 1 to 9 (9 being the highest). Of the 400+ students enrolled during the 2000-01 school year, over half (53%) were Latino, 40% were Caucasian or from multiple ethnic backgrounds, 5% were Asian, and African American, American Indian, and Pacific Islanders constituted 2%. The primary non-English languages of students were Spanish (29% or 116 students) and Punjabi and/or Urdu (9% or 38), representing 32% of the total enrollment. Approximately 66% of the students qualify for the free/reduced lunch program. Family structures of the students are mixed; many students are from blended families, single parent families, families whose head is a grandparent or foster parent, and, in a few cases, homeless.

Leadership for the school rests with a principal who completed her third year during 2001. During this principal's tenure, a concerted effort has been made to stimulate a renaissance of the school. New initiatives have been undertaken, including the development of an extensive after school program, the construction of a new playground and a school garden, the wiring of the school buildings for computer/internet use, and efforts to engage parents through parent advisory

groups and activities. A key value underlying these efforts and many academic initiatives is a clear commitment to increasing learning opportunities, equity, and academic achievement.<sup>2</sup> For the principal, a key variable in achieving these goals is the involvement of parents in their children's education.

## Method

A participatory action research approach (Stringer, 1996; Whyte, 1991) was planned and organized in conjunction with the school principal. The site researcher worked in the school over a four-month period while fulfilling several roles: participant observer, facilitator, interviewer, organizer of specific actions, and coordinator of the overall interventions. On average, the researcher was present in the school three to four times per week for several hours at a time. The majority of the time spent in the school was in after school settings with teachers and parents. Outside-the-school (building) settings, particularly the school parking lot, an outside common eating area, and the staff and multi-purpose room, were frequently used to meet and converse with parents and staff. In addition, planned interviews with teachers and parents were conducted in classrooms and the outside eating area respectively.

The site researcher began her work in February, 2001 as an observer and a participant. The research and intervention work was initiated with the Elm Street principal and was continued throughout the four months that followed. The initial goal was to gain an understanding of the school, the teachers, the students, and the type and degree of parent involvement at the school. Over the next months several interventions (as detailed below) designed to test parent involvement were initiated and monitored. Interviews were also conducted with Elm Street Elementary teachers and with a number of parents. Interviews were conducted in small groups and individually. Since a number of parents were monolingual in either Spanish or Urdu, those interviews were carried out in those languages. The site researcher is a native Urdu speaker; a native Spanish speaker also worked with the project to conduct interviews with Spanish-speaking parents. Other interviews were conducted in English by the site researcher. Two distinct interventions were conceived and planned with the principal and other staff. These interventions, designed as tests of hoped-for openings for parent involvement, were monitored by the site researcher for their efficiency, effectiveness, acceptance, and appropriateness.

## Intervention #1: Elm Street Parent Newsletter Box

The first intervention was the placement of a mobile parent newsletter box designed to provide regular printed information to parents. The idea behind the

box was to provide a new means of communication between parents and the school that would not require face-to-face conversation between parents and school staff. It also would not require parents to enter the school office; rather, the box was placed out near the parking lot where parents picked up their children. The plastic box was approximately 3 feet tall with six drawers that could easily be wheeled to the front of the school. Each drawer contained information for parents in English and Spanish in the form of a parent newsletter, monthly event fliers, comments/suggestion forms, a drop box for the Principal, etc.

Initially, there was hesitation by school staff regarding the Parent box. Staff worried who would carry out the day-to-day responsibilities of maintaining the box and keeping it filled with current newsletters and fliers. Staff negotiated with the researcher and principal as to the extent of their responsibility. It was agreed that the box would be filled by the researcher and the custodian would place the box out before school in the morning and return it to the building at the end of the school day.

## Results

Although the box was out in plain view with a sign on it, most parents and children took little notice of it. After the first two weeks, daily placement of the box in the parking lot became tedious and was not carried out as often. After the first month the box was rarely placed out for use by the parents.

There may be many reasons why the box never gained great success. The box was conceived of by the researcher and the principal and designed and implemented by the researcher, not by the staff. Perhaps if this idea had been developed by the staff, there would have been greater interest and commitment to the idea. Secondly, it was discovered after interviewing teachers that the majority of communication between the parents and teachers occurred on a verbal basis. Considering the number of parents whose native tongue was not English and who may be more comfortable talking rather than reading fliers from the school, perhaps a written form of communication was not the most effective method of engaging these parents. The parent newsletter box did not fulfill an important and unique function, nor was it either appropriate or acceptable to parents. If the box had contained material that parents wanted and could not obtain from other sources, the box might then have played a more useful role in communication between parents and the school. As it was, the box contained parent newsletters and other notes that most parents were apparently uninterested in reading.

## **Intervention #2: School-Wide World Map Project**

A second and surprisingly successful attempt to engage parents was the school-wide world map project. Considering the ethnic diversity of students at Elm Street Elementary, many of whom were first generation Americans, the concept of discovering each child's ethnic background and having each child locate the country or countries they came from seemed to present an education and involvement opportunity. This activity was also envisioned as something that could provide parents with the sense that they were valued in the school. Personal family information could only come from the family, not the school. The Map project began when the children were given a tri-lingual newsletter in English, Spanish, and Urdu which requested students and their families to complete and return the following information: student's birth city, state, and country; parent's birth city, state, and country; and country where ancestors (great-grandparents) lived.

### **Results**

Completed slips were collected at two different times. Initially, those children whose teachers strongly encouraged the students to turn in their slips had the most compliance (one enthusiastic teacher initially had 18 of 20 students turn in their slips). The children who turned in their slips were invited to a pizza party at lunch one day, during which they pinned their country of origin on a world map. The pizza party was conducted in plain view of the other students during lunch. This increased interest among other students; therefore, a second deadline to collect slips and a second pizza party was arranged. Initially 15% of the students turned in their slips by the first deadline, but nearly 50% of students turned in their slips by the second deadline. This increase in participation and interest was very encouraging for both researchers and school staff. Subsequently, all the information was put on a large, full color world map by having students place pins in the areas from which they, their parents, or their grandparents had originated.

When talking to teachers about this concept, reactions were mixed on the value and potential success of the World Map Project. Many teachers thought that having children identify their ethnic heritage geographically was educationally valuable, but others doubted that enough information would be turned in to make the project worthwhile.

### **Teacher Interviews**

Of the 19 full-time teachers at Elm Street Elementary, fifteen teachers were interviewed in three different groups. Groupings were on the basis of grade levels taught

(see Table 1). Each group interview was complemented by a brief survey filled out prior to the interviews. The combined results of this survey were used to facilitate and focus open discussion within the group interviews. Teachers were informed that all information was being collected to help the school and that all identifying information would be kept confidential. The interview questions were focused on experiences, successes/failures, expectations, limitations, and suggestions related to parent involvement. Interview questions were open ended and the discussions were recorded by the researcher.

**Table 1.** Number and groupings of teachers interviewed.

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Number of Teachers</b>	<b>Number Participating</b>	<b>Group Number</b>
Kindergarten	3	2	1 <sup>st</sup> group
First	3	3	1 <sup>st</sup> group
Second	3	2	2 <sup>nd</sup> group
Second/Third combination	1	1	2 <sup>nd</sup> group
Third	3	1	2 <sup>nd</sup> group
Fourth	2	2	3 <sup>rd</sup> group
Fifth	2	2	3 <sup>rd</sup> group
Sixth	2	2	3 <sup>rd</sup> group
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>15</b>	

## Results

The 15 teachers interviewed ranged from very experienced (22 years teaching with 5 at Elm Street) to new (2nd year teaching at Elm Street). The kindergarten teachers tended to report the most interaction with parents, seeing most of them on a daily basis when they came to pick up their children. Interaction decreased with increasing grade. When asked how teachers would like to have parents participate, most teachers said they would like to have a parent come read to a small group, individually help children in their classroom, or present to the class as a group.

At Elm Street, many of the parents were neither fluent in English nor high academic achievers, and often were not comfortable helping children in an English academic setting. Therefore, it was important to this study to explore whether teachers recognized this obstacle and whether they had uncovered a way to solve it. In response to the ideas discussed on parent participation, the teachers were asked "What about non-English speaking parents?" It seemed as if most teachers had not considered a way to overcome this problem. They did take the time of the



interview to brainstorm ideas.

When asked why parents don't participate, every group of teachers cited significant obstacles that occupy parents' time. These included working two jobs, small children in the home, multiple responsibilities, and even discouragement from family members. Teachers empathize with the parents of their students, often stating that they did not have any expectations for parent participation. They viewed any participation they got from parents as a bonus. They also stated that parents may not participate in their children's education because their own parents were not that involved with their children. Additionally, teachers recognized that if parents had a bad experience in school themselves or if they were not successful academically, they may not feel confident in their ability to educate others.

An important part of the interviews was the request that teachers characterize the type of parents who are able to participate but do not feel welcome in the school or do not feel they have anything to contribute to the school. Teachers were asked to think about how they could help parents feel more comfortable at the school. One teacher reported s/he had been doing monthly potlucks with parents for the past two years. Initially responses were limited, but after the first six months parents began to come more often to the potlucks. The teacher was careful to schedule the potlucks around 5:30 p.m. so most parents would be off of work. The teacher stated that s/he was careful not to discuss anything academic with the parents during this time. S/he mentioned that most parents of children that were doing poorly in school were hesitant to approach the school because every time they spoke to their child's teacher, the teacher would cite the child's poor school performance and make the parent feel unhappy and disappointed. It was speculated that seeing the teacher would become associated with these negative feelings and therefore parents would avoid seeing their child's teacher. Ironically, the children that are doing poorly in school are the ones that need their parents to be supportive and involved in their children's education. So by providing parents with an opportunity to meet teachers in a non-threatening and supportive environment, this teacher found one way to make parents more comfortable in the school environment.

A second teacher also reported an interesting and successful strategy to increase parental comfort in the school environment. S/he said that it is unreasonable to expect parents to live up to teacher's expectations unless those expectations are clearly stated from the beginning of the school year. Each year when children start school, s/he explains the minimum amount of effort that s/he requires of parents and asks them to agree to achieving these goals. Expectations are easy to accomplish for almost all parents, and s/he expects each parent to do so. If a parent begins to fall behind on the teacher's expectations, s/he immediately calls the parent and asks why they were unable to accomplish the agreed upon goals. If there is an unforeseen complication, the teacher and the parent renegotiate the terms of their

agreement and the two work together to overcome any obstacles. In this way the teacher feels that there are no hidden requirements of the parent. Everything is clear and open and the parent does not feel that they are not reaching the goals that the teacher requires.

Although a few teachers had considered and even implemented some ideas on how to make parents more comfortable in the school environment, overall this was not a frequent topic for the teachers. By sitting down and discussing these ideas, many teachers felt they had the opportunity to explore a topic that they felt was rather important, but they generally never had time to discuss. Expressing to these teachers the value of parent participation may make parents a higher priority at Elm Street Elementary.

## **Parent Interviews**

Eleven parents, all women, were interviewed on a one-on-one basis. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, English, or Urdu, depending on the language with which the parent was most comfortable. Announcements were sent home with all students and were placed in the newsletter box. Parents of students who participated in the after school program were specifically targeted for participation. Students in the after school program were encouraged to bring their parents and were promised snacks. A total of 30 families were targeted, of which eleven were interviewed. Interviews were held at the school in an outside area during the afternoon hours over a two week period. The majority of the parents recruited and interviewed had children who participated in the Elm Street Elementary After School Program that operated daily from 3 to 6 p.m. The times and sites for the interviews were seen (by the researchers and the principal) as convenient for the parents. Overall, parents seemed willing to participate in the study and talk openly, and never seemed to be in a hurry.

Parents were presented with a series of oral questions and then were allowed to discuss their views on the school and teachers. These questions were the same for all parents. Questions included queries about their children and their parental relationship, their children's class and teachers, their own experiences with and in the school, and their involvement with the After School Program and the local PTA.

## **Results**

Faculty at Elm Street were surprised that we were able to interview even eleven of the targeted 30 parents. Many predicted a smaller outcome and felt researchers were wasting time. The information provided by the parents helped identify those areas in which parents and teachers agreed or disagreed. The parents interviewed

were patient and open to the questions. They expressed that they were pleased with the school, and many of them commented on the after school program since it provided extra help for their children. One parent said she particularly liked that university students<sup>3</sup> were there to help out the children because it created relationships in which both the interns learn from the students and the students from the interns. The parents stated that they were pleased that the staff and faculty at the school had taken on projects to improve the school. One parent said she has compared it to other schools and concluded that Elm Street Elementary was the best school in the city of Wheatley. Two different interviewees commented on the bilingual program at Elm Street. One parent liked the program because her child seemed to be proficient in both English and Spanish. But another parent was concerned that when her child is put in an all-English program, her Spanish proficiency would diminish. Both parents agreed that they appreciated having the option of placing their child in bilingual programs.

Almost all parents interviewed stated that they had attended a recent cultural celebration at the school. The parents seemed to be pleased that the staff and faculty, especially the teachers, reached out to them because it reinforced the concept that their children are important to the school. One parent mentioned that she was very satisfied with the teachers, not only because they helped the students progress, but also because the teachers helped the parent to help her children. She really liked that the teachers communicated with one another. She said that she felt that when her kids went on to their next grade, the teacher would already have an understanding as to what material s/he needed to teach and which students needed help in particular areas.

## **Discussion**

This study of Elm Street Elementary and its parent connections was intended to discover why parents become involved in their children's education and why parents choose specific types of involvement. It was also used to test two interventions designed to facilitate communication and involvement of parents in their children's school and education. The study was guided by a proposed model for parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995) which also provided a map for probing its utility.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model suggested that parents first decide whether they want to be involved in their children's education, and any such decision is subsequently influenced by a combination of the parents' skills and knowledge, the mix of demands on their total time, and the specific invitations from children and the school. Results from the surveys and interviews of parents

and teachers support this aspect of the model. Some parents possibly did have time to volunteer, but because they felt it was not expected or required of them, they chose not to be involved. On the other hand, some parents who were quite busy would make time to volunteer if they felt it was necessary. For example, one teacher said that if she asked a particular parent who owned a local restaurant to come and talk in order to help their child in school, he would make time although he was extremely busy. Another parent who used to be regularly involved in another elementary school where the majority of parents came to school events changed her behavior while at Elm Street. When she came to Elm Street she noted that parents did not seem to be as active. She took her cue from the other parents and came less frequently to events because “parents just don’t do that at Elm Street.”

In terms of the two tested interventions (i.e., the newsletter box and the map project), results to invite participation were mixed at best. The newsletter effort was started but in a short time was abandoned due primarily to the lack of interest and involvement. Targeted parents were not in the habit of expecting or reading school missives and the anticipated attraction of the box’s accessibility was not realized. A lesson was learned from this attempt—the teachers could have played an “advertising” role by encouraging their students to encourage their parents to pick up and read the newsletters and other materials. Even more directly, students could have been encouraged to pick up and give the items to their parents. These results suggest that, in the context of Elm Street Elementary, elements of the school climate will have to change more before newsletters and the like are seen as important, appropriate, or acceptable for the parents and teachers.

In the case of the map project, direct participation of parents in filling out the survey of origins and birthplaces was mixed. Nevertheless, it did demonstrate a very simple way for many parents to contribute to their children’s education which, in turn, can lead to concrete outcomes (e.g., the Elm Street map). The results again demonstrated that teacher commitment is vital and can lead to simple forms of parent participation. Results also showed the power of incentives as participation by the students increased when they saw other students who had obtained parent input on the surveys get free pizza.

### Barriers

This experience also speaks to the enormous amount of effort often required to find new ways to engage parents in an elementary school. Most school staff did not have the time or inclination to invest in a parent participation project. This fact is no doubt true in any school where participation is low. Without adequate interest from the parents, attempts to engage parents may prove costly and ineffectual, leaving school staff discouraged and reaffirming their belief that parent participation is too difficult a project for investing limited resources and energy.

The particular context of the school studied is a key factor. One unique aspect of Elm Street is that more than one-third of the students are English as a Second Language learners with Spanish or Urdu as their first languages. Many of Elm Street's parents are immigrants and are new to American culture and educational practices. These factors presented many obstacles to parents participating in the classroom, in the after school program, or in the school in general.

The most obvious barrier was that of language. Non-English speaking adults often have a difficult time reading, teaching concepts, or helping with homework in English. Since most teachers imagine parent participation in one of these forms, these "barriers" reduce the average non-English speaking parents' avenues for participation. Teachers at Elm Street did not have a solution to this challenge, and a large percentage of the parent population remains under-utilized. Other avenues of participation (e.g., working in the classroom, making school visits, etc.) remain equally at a distance.

Culture is also an important factor in student educational success and parent participation and encouragement. Many (though certainly not all) parents at Elm Street School have not obtained a high school diploma and many themselves grew up in settings in which educational success was little valued. For these parents, it may be difficult to rationalize putting a large amount of their personal effort into their children's school success. Work, family, home, and multiple other demands take priority both for themselves and for their children. Therefore, when a child is struggling in school, parents may feel that it is better in the long run to refocus that child's energy into something else at which they may be more successful. On the other hand, parents also expressed dreams for success and wanted to have faith in the educational system, but were nevertheless doubtful. Family histories often revealed that neither the respondent nor anyone they knew had ever reaped substantial rewards from educational efforts. This view can significantly undermine parental participation for underachieving students, and this pattern may be likely to repeat itself in future generations.

In a setting such as Elm Street Elementary, in which many parents had had limited success in completing their own formal education, the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model suggests that such parents would be negatively influenced by the school because of their own experiences with education. The study of Elm Street Elementary teachers revealed that many teachers also believed in a generational pattern. Both because of their limited education and cultural roles, it may seem that many parents of students at Elm Street also were not involved in their children's education, and therefore Elm Street parents' construction of the parental role would not include direct participation in their children's education. A few parents were asked whether they felt it was important to become involved in the school, and they said that they felt school was the teacher's responsibility. Many teachers

also related that parents did not feel a responsibility for supervising their children's education. Thus, both parents and teachers support the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model.

### Implications

In relation to language and cultural challenges faced, Elm Street Elementary school has worked to modify its climate. There has been a consistent effort to provide information in both English and Spanish, and on an experimental basis, in three languages, adding Urdu. The school also has a relatively diverse teaching staff, some of whom are Latino(a) and most of whom have had significant cross-cultural experiences. This combination of factors has proved successful in encouraging ethnically similar families to communicate and participate in the school. When teachers of the same ethnic community connect with parents, not only as teachers but as members of that community, stronger relationships form. This phenomenon was evidenced by the site researcher's own success in communicating with parents from the same ethnic identification (i.e. Urdu). In this case, parents actively sought out the researcher in the parking lot, on the playground, and in the school's multi-purpose room. Another role that the researcher played vis-à-vis the teaching staff was that of cultural educator. Specifically, the researcher was able to clarify cultural elements unknown by—but important to—the teaching staff, such as the role of dress, the differential roles of men and women, etc. In the setting of Elm Street, cultural brokering by teachers from different cultural-ethnic-language groups could occur as a form of "staff training."

The lesson here is not new but bears repeating: culture and language count. However, culture is not simply a matter of ethnicity or language. It also involves social and economic factors, as well as levels of and attitudes toward education. As was found in Elm Street Elementary, the educational culture of the teachers and schools may be at odds with that of the parents, and sensitivity to any such differences is critical. The point is concisely captured in the following quote:

Partnering between professionally trained educators (with their arcane array of coded wordings and behavioral scripts) and the non-professional parent (equipped often with less "sophistication" and a substantial cultural divide)—is not uncommonly constrained by these (often vast) differences in background and perspective. (Crowson, 2001, p.88)

## Conclusion

Elm Street Elementary School and its neighborhood community constitute only one case among thousands. Nevertheless, this school and its community are similar to many others found throughout California and the nation. The school and community, like many others, are mixed ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and economically. The demands on teachers and parents are multiple and unrelenting. In the current school environment, the issues of promoting academic achievement, excellence, and opportunity are daily reminders and realities for the teaching staff. To add the further expectation of parent involvement to teachers' loads is not necessarily welcomed. For many parents with work demands, mixed educational histories, and culturally diverse views of schools and education, the invitation for parent involvement is often a challenge. However, parents do play significant and telling roles in the educational success of their children and, by extension, for the individual teachers and schools as well.

This case study revealed that change will be a difficult process for Elm Street to undergo, but it would be well worth it. While much more research and experimentation must be done to understand the complex issues related to parent involvement, and many new ideas will have to be implemented to approach this goal, the findings are useful and applicable. Parents can and will decide to be involved. The opportunity that follows is to provide the appropriate and acceptable means for that involvement. But appropriateness and acceptability do not stop with the parents. The standards of appropriateness and acceptability also must be applied to the teachers and the school itself. This study did find that there are new ideas and experiments that may be attempted which can lead to successful parent involvement, for the benefit of the children, their families, and their school.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Names of the school, community and all persons have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup> For the 2000-01 school year, Elm Street was the only school in the county to significantly exceed its targeted score on the state mandated achievement test and the school and teachers have received significant financial rewards.

<sup>3</sup> A nearby university was a working partner with the school in the creation and operation of a daily after school program. University students served as interns, mentors and teachers in the program.

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