

# Amistades: The Development of Relationships Between Preservice Teachers and Latino Families

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## Abstract

Preservice teachers from a Hispanic-serving university and Latino families reflected on their interactions during an after-school children's tutoring program conducted at an elementary school. This paper focuses on issues that both preservice teachers and families found important to communication and relationship building. These issues were valuing what families bring to the educational process, congruency in the interpretation of teacher roles, and the importance of language to communication and relationship building.

Key Words: family involvement, Latino families, teacher education, qualitative methods, language, culture, bilingual teachers, preservice teachers, field-based learning

## Introduction

Ustedes, padres de familia, jugaron un papel muy importante para que esta actividad finalizar exitosamente. Reitero mis agradecimientos a todo el equipo de trabajo, que intervino en esta actividad. (*All of you, heads of families, played an important role in making this activity a success. I give my thanks to everyone in the team who took part in this activity.*)

—Preservice Teacher

[Note: Throughout this article, written quotes from participants in both English and Spanish have not been corrected for spelling or grammar errors to preserve authenticity.]

From the Fall of 2002, a reading tutoring program has been arranged as part of preservice teachers' coursework. Every semester for 10 weeks, between 35 and 60 preservice teachers work with prekindergarten through first grade children to provide one-on-one tutoring. As part of the program, a family involvement component requires the preservice teachers to communicate with the family before and after the tutoring session. We found that powerful relationships can be developed between preservice teachers and families if given the opportunity to engage with each other in a dialogue. At the end of a one-semester tutoring program, one tutor wrote a letter (quoted in part above) to the parents of her student and volunteered to read it to all the families to thank them for the effort they had made in attending the program. She also thanked them for giving her the opportunity to work as a tutor. Her letter and many other communications show that structured engagement between preservice teachers and families leads to the development of *amistades*, or friendships.

### Family Involvement and Preservice Teachers

The tutoring program provided preservice teachers with structured opportunities to interact and communicate with families prior to becoming certified teachers. Preservice teachers were provided with conversation starters each week to encourage interaction with the families. These prompts helped the preservice teachers elicit information from the families about home activities and interests as well as finding out what they wanted for their children from the tutoring program, for example, "Please explain to the family member what you will do/did. Please ask the family member what type of things they do at home to promote reading, writing, listening, and speaking." These conversation starters often were the beginning of longer discussions in which both preservice teachers and families shared a variety of experiences and information.

Providing such opportunities to preservice teachers is significant, because preparation for working with families is generally limited during preservice teachers' education (Graue, 2005; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Young & Hite, 1994) as well as when they enter the workforce (Epstein et al., 2002). As a result, teachers often lack the confidence to work with families or may have negative attitudes about family involvement (Rasinski, 2001; Tichenor, 1997, 1998).

Teachers who have received training with families in their preservice teacher preparation program report feeling well-equipped to use a variety of family involvement practices (Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Katz, 1999; Morris & Taylor, 1998). Additionally, these teachers are less likely to stereotype single parents, working class parents, or parents with less formal education (Epstein et al., 2002).

Findings confirm that teachers' practices and specific school programs are the strongest predictor of family involvement at school and at home (Dauber

& Epstein, 1989). In general, proactive communication by the school can increase family involvement (Feuerstein, 2000). Teachers note that communication between families and teachers is the essence of Latino family involvement (Gaitan, 2004). Therefore, structured opportunities in preservice training allow preservice teachers to enhance communication skills that help develop meaningful relationships with Latino families.

Differing interpretations of family-teacher roles pose a barrier to communication and relationship building. School staff may interpret Latino families' actions as disinterest in their child's schooling, while families consider themselves as having fulfilled their family responsibilities by caring for basic needs and instilling respect for authority (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Gaitan, 2004; McCollum, 1996; Paratore et al., 1995; Valdés, 1996). Understanding and respecting how families interpret their role in schooling enhances communication. To understand families, teachers must be cognizant of the diversity among families. Teachers also should be cognizant of their own role in the family-teacher partnership (Broussard, 2003; Keyes, 2002; McCarthy, 2000).

Family involvement programs can pose a barrier to communication and the development of relationships if such programs assume families need to be changed to be successful in working with their own children (Gaitan, 2004; McCollum, 1996). Such attitudes lead teachers to engage in deficit thinking as opposed to building upon cultural strengths (Peña, 2000; Valdés, 1996; Valencia, 1997). Teachers need to value and build upon the background knowledge and support that families provide their children (McCaleb, 2001; Moll, Velez Ibanez, & Greenberg, 1990). Teachers should consider what is known about culturally different families, their attitudes toward education, and how families support their children's education in order to enhance family-teacher relationships (McCaleb; McCollum). Teacher education programs in the United States have not satisfactorily addressed diverse family styles and cultural backgrounds or recognized that all families have strengths. Teacher education should introduce potential teachers to authentic school-based experiences earlier in their college experiences in order to build a strong foundation for successful parent-teacher communication (Tellez, 2004).

For this paper we will be describing the experiences of preservice teachers and families from the United States-Mexico border. Defining a single term for the ethnic backgrounds of this group is difficult, as a number of preferred terms (i.e., Hispanic, Mexican American, Mexicano, Chicano) are currently in use which may or may not imply distinctions (See Limón, 1994; Martínez, 1998 for a discussion). In general, we have tried to use the term selected by the participant or the author referenced. Our preferred term, Latino or Latina, is used in the global sense to cover all of our participants who come from

a Spanish-speaking heritage. This may include Mexican nationals, Mexican Americans, and others of Latin American descent.

### **Language and Culture in Teacher Preparation**

The fostering of two-way communication between home and school has been acknowledged as a factor in high performing schools serving Latino students (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999). Gaitan (2004) recognizes the sharing of information between home and school as a necessary ingredient to successful communication with Latino families. Such sharing involves educators elaborating on what is happening in school and learning about the child's experience in the family. Teachers who employ two-way communication enhance overall communication with families and demonstrate a valuing of the child's home experiences (McCarthy, 2000). Implicit in communicating with families is the issue of removing language differences. The lack of bilingual school staff is seen as a barrier to communication efforts, leading parents to feel excluded from the school process (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Gaitan; McCollum, 1996).

Preparing teachers for working in multicultural contexts has focused on preparing European American teachers to work in culturally different contexts (e.g., Gonzalez-Mena, 2001; Kharem & Villaverde, 2002). Research on preparing ethnic minority teachers has focused primarily on recruitment, retention, and barriers to education (e.g., Clark & Flores, 2002; Milk, Mercado, & Sapiens, 1992). This research looks at ethnic minority preservice teachers working with diverse families.

Ethnic minority teachers bring unique cultural and linguistic abilities to their work with diverse families. Trueba (1998) describes a Chicano teacher's ability to work with Mexican immigrant children and their families. Teacher Manuel uses both Spanish and English in the classroom and uses culturally appropriate ways of interacting with the students: "...the relationship between a Mexican teacher and his or her students is of a different quality. For example....There is a conspicuous display of love and affection" (p. 15). The ability to relate to families is important in that a congruence exists between the cultural communication patterns of the families and educators.

On the other hand, Mexican American ethnic identity is not a monolithic characteristic, rather it is extremely complex, reflecting the influences of language, assimilation, socioeconomic status, and race (Richardson, 1999). Educational environments often attempt to assimilate Latino children by enforcing English language instruction and by punishing students for using Spanish in all contexts, including on playgrounds. This attempted assimilation often leads to feelings of inadequacy and develops an "us" vs. "them" dichotomy,

which can lead to conflicts between less culturally assimilated individuals and individuals who more closely associate with United States culture (Martínez, 1998; Sutterby, Ayala, & Murillo, 2005). Tellez (2004) cautions against the assumption that Latino teachers always understand Latino culture:

We might argue that a third generation Latino teacher...may have a difficult time understanding, much less legitimating, the culture of a family recently emigrated from rural Mexico. Such a family may have little understanding of formal schooling, no experience of urban life and speak not Spanish but one of the indigenous languages of Mexico. In this case cultural verification or affirmation is unlikely and the Latino teacher may be as disadvantaged as the European-American, monolingual English teacher. (p. 52)

Another aspect of teacher education is preparation for communicating with families that speak a language other than English. Teachers who are able to communicate effectively with families avoid conflicts with families and are better able to develop understandings with families (Chamberlain, 2005). Teachers preparing to work with Spanish-speaking families often need to develop their Spanish language proficiency. However, many educators trained to work in bilingual classrooms have difficulty communicating in Spanish (Guerrero, 2003). Preservice teachers preparing to work with Spanish-speaking children and families often come from homes where Spanish is spoken, but they have limited exposure to academic Spanish (Sutterby, Ayala, & Murillo, 2005).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Preparation to teach in a pluralistic society results from authentic experiences and instruction that readies prospective teachers for real-world settings. (Izquierdo, Lignons, & Erwin, 1998, p. 3)

Keyes (2002) describes the complex arrangement of factors critical for the development of parent-teacher relationships. These factors include the cultural and language backgrounds of parents and teachers. Our framework is based primarily on two theories, social constructivism and culturally relevant instruction. Social constructivism, for us, is based on the idea that knowledge is learned in a shared context and not solely in the individual. Learning is a human process based on interactions between different members of a social group (Kim, 2001). Preservice teachers' knowledge about families is socially constructed through their own histories, experiences, and interactions with others. In order to prepare preservice teachers to implement effective parental involvement, we believe that they should be involved in mediated experiences

directly with parents and families. Culturally relevant instruction is founded on the belief that understandings of events and interactions can differ depending on the cultural experiences of participants. Traditionally, the instructional practices and knowledge of European culture have been valued as the norm from which others are viewed as different and deficient. Valuing the cultural understandings of all participants in the learning process is an important way to ensure the instruction is relevant to the learner (Godina, 2003; Chamberlain, 2005). Relationships do not develop in a vacuum; effective relationships between parents/families and preservice teachers must address issues of culturally relevant practice and deficit perspectives held by many about parents and families (Izquierdo et al., 1998). Our program attempts to address both of these issues.

## Methodology

### Setting and Participants

Treviño Elementary (Note: all names used are pseudonyms) is located within a mile of the Texas-Mexico border. The small school (500 students) is in an older neighborhood, surrounded by small, wood-frame single family homes, most of which were built in the 1940s and 50s. All of the children at the school come from the neighborhood, which is a mix of second and third (or more) generation Latino families and recent immigrants from Mexico. The neighborhood is close to the border, so there is a fluid connection with Mexico, as family members frequently pass back and forth across the border for activities such as work, shopping, visiting family, and medical services.

The Evening Reading Improvement Program provides one-on-one after-school tutoring at Treviño Elementary to between 35 and 60 prekindergarten to second grade children each semester. The Evening Reading Improvement Program is a collaborative partnership between the local university, which provides the tutors, and the school, which provides the participants and space for the program.

Each semester, university preservice teachers enrolled in undergraduate bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) reading courses meet at the partner elementary school to tutor once each week for ten weeks. The practical experience provided through the Evening Reading Improvement Program is in line with the School of Education's policy to include field-based experiences in as many courses as possible, and the experience does not take the place of student teaching or other classroom-based experiences.

The preservice teachers who participated in the program were seeking certification in early childhood to 4<sup>th</sup> grade bilingual or ESL. In the years 2002-2006,

the preservice teachers were overwhelmingly Latina (85%), tended to be older than teachers from traditional teacher education programs (average age 28.2 years), and many had families and children (and occasionally grandchildren) of their own (about 30%). All preservice teachers in the bilingual program spoke both English and Spanish fluently, and about half of the preservice teachers in the ESL program were fluent in both English and Spanish.

In addition to the preservice teachers, the program personnel included the three faculty members who are the authors of this article and graduate students in the educational administration program who were completing internships. These personnel were responsible for recruiting participants, organizing literacy activities for the parents, and evaluating the preservice teachers. University faculty recruit families for the program by making contact through attendance at school meetings such as open houses and the distribution of flyers explaining the program. Family participation in the program is voluntary.

The families that participated in the program, for the most part, came from the neighborhood. The school which provided the participants was 100% Latino, 99% low income, and 59% English language learners. Most parents were from working class backgrounds, although there were a few professionals such as teachers and nurses.

The Evening Reading Improvement Program began in Fall 2002 and completed its eighth academic semester of operation with the Spring 2006 semester. Data for this qualitative study were collected across four academic semesters from Fall 2003 through Spring 2005. All preservice teachers enrolled in the specified reading courses across these four academic semesters participated in the study. Family members participating in the Evening Reading Improvement Program volunteered their participation in the study. The reading improvement program had evolved to improve communication between the families and the tutors prior to this study based on data collected in previous semesters.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data sources for this research included information from the preservice teachers and information from the families. The data sources for the preservice teachers included their weekly reflections, open-ended questions in pre- and post-surveys, and end-of-course reflections collected across four academic semesters. Reflections from each of over 160 preservice teachers were collected and analyzed. This number reflects the total number of preservice teachers participating in the study.

The data sources from the families came from focus groups conducted across three academic semesters between Fall 2003 and Spring 2005. Approximately 22 family members participated in these groups.

Reflections were written weekly by the preservice teachers on their interactions with the families. The reflections generally were 2-3 pages in length and were based on how the child interacted with the tutor and what the tutor learned from the family as well as responses to more structured questions. The preservice teachers were asked to reflect on their opinions and experiences with family involvement as part of the reflections. Two examples of questions are:

- What role do you think families should play in helping their children learn to read and write at home?
- What did you learn as a result of having the opportunity to work with families?

The instructors for the courses responded to the reflections in order to give the preservice teachers feedback and suggestions.

In addition to weekly reflections, preservice teachers were asked to complete pre- and post-semester surveys. The open-ended questions for the pre-semester survey were:

1. What do you expect the parents to be like? What makes you think that?
2. How do you think parents help their children with literacy development? What makes you think that?
3. What keeps parents from being involved in their children's education? What makes you think that?
4. How do you feel about working with Treviño parents? Why?
5. What concerns do you have about communicating with the parents?
6. In what ways were your parents involved in your education?
7. If you are a parent of a school age child, how are you involved in your child's education? If you are not a parent, how will you be involved?

The four open-ended questions for the post-semester survey were

1. After participating in tutoring, has your feeling about the role of parents in education changed at all?
2. What role do you think parents should play in helping their children learn to read and write at home?
3. What is the role of the teacher in getting parents to participate in helping their child to learn to read and write?
4. How did your level of Spanish language proficiency impact interactions with parents during the reading program?

The use of standardized open-ended questions allowed the researchers to focus the preservice teachers' attention on certain topics of interest without limiting the possible responses (Patton, 1990).

Three focus groups were conducted with families participating in the program. Each focus group consisted of 6-8 family members and was conducted



primarily in Spanish by one of the researchers. The groups were a convenience sample based on families present during the tutoring sessions who were willing to participate. All participants were female and had one to three children in the program. All were first or second generation immigrants from Mexico. Two focus groups were tape recorded and one was scripted. Data was transcribed resulting in a transcript for each focus group.

Family members participating in the focus groups were asked open-ended questions such as, “Durante el semestre han hablado con los tutores, ¿cómo han sido sus relaciones con los tutores o las tutoras?” (*During the semester you have talked to the tutors; what is your relationship with the tutors?*)

Some family members may have modified their answers to the questions because one or two of the researchers were present and other families were present. However, the focus group discussion gave the researchers an opportunity to better understand the perspectives of the families and to use follow-up questions when responses were unclear (Williams & Katz, 2001).

### Data Analysis

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the university’s institutional review board. Part of the IRB’s approval process included obtaining permission from the school district to conduct the ongoing study, as well as the appropriate use of signed and oral consent forms for all participants.

The researchers searched for patterns in the data concerning factors that facilitate or obstruct preservice teacher-family communication and relationship building on an annual basis. The researchers then categorized the data according to the patterns of culture and language that emerged (Krathwohl, 1993). The three researchers analyzed the data and searched for patterns separately, then shared their analysis, thus providing a peer check of the analysis (Carspecken, 1996). This peer checking involved weekly meetings to discuss and reflect on the progress of the program, observations, and possible changes. Multiple data sources and peer checks were used to triangulate the emerging findings and to contribute to the credibility of the study (Patton, 1990).

The overarching theme which emerged from the data analysis was the importance of relationship building between the families and the preservice teachers. Three aspects of this relationship seemed to have special importance. These aspects included (a) valuing what families bring to the educational process, (b) congruency in the interpretation of teacher roles, and (c) the importance of language to communication and relationship building.

There were some limitations to the study that may inhibit its generalization to other settings. The study was conducted at an elementary school close to the border with Mexico. The families were about 99% Latino and Spanish-

language dominant, while 85% of the preservice teachers were Latino, with about 80% of them fluent in Spanish. Although the families and preservice teachers had similarities in language and culture that may not exist in other locations, there were still some differences in education, income level, number of years in the United States, and fluency in English and Spanish.

## Findings

### Valuing What Families Bring to the Educational Process

Educators in the public school system have often been described as having a deficit mentality towards families from non-traditional backgrounds. The preservice teachers in our program were able to develop a relationship with families, which allowed them to see the values families brought with them to the educational enterprise.

Families were seen by the preservice teachers as having many strengths to support their children's education. These strengths included their *esfuerzo* (effort) in wanting to do all they can to help their children succeed, their *orgullo* (pride) in their children's accomplishments, and their high expectations for their children. As one preservice teacher reflected, "They want the student to prosper academically and socially in order for her to have and do more than they were able to do educationally in their home country." In addition, the preservice teachers reflected on the parents' knowledge of their children's strengths and needs, their knowledge of the Latino culture, and their use of extended family as a support system.

In contrast, some parents reported that their skills were not valued by the regular classroom teacher:

Yo me he ofrecido con la maestra de que cuando falta la asistente, le digo si necesita algo puedo venir a ayudarle verdad con los niños o a sacar copias. Siempre me dice, yo le hablo o yo le digo después. (*I have offered to help the teacher when her assistant is absent. I can help her, right, with the children or make copies. She always tells me, "I'll call you," or "I'll tell you later."*)

The opportunities to interact directly with the families also gave the tutors opportunities to view the family members as experts. On one family literacy night, family members, preservice teachers, and children learned, sang, and did movements to traditional Mexican rhymes. The families became the experts because some of the preservice teachers did not know the rhymes, but most of the parents did. For the tutors, many of these songs were unfamiliar, as one tutor, born in Mexico, wrote in reflection,

Para nosotros maestros criados aquí en los Estados Unidos, fue una lección en el aprendizaje de canciones de niños en español. Para mí fue un recuerdo de melodías ya olvidadas. (*For those of us born in the United States it was a lesson in children's songs in Spanish. For me, it was a remembrance of forgotten melodies.*)

The ability of the parents to demonstrate their expertise and knowledge of songs and fingerplays in Spanish allowed them the opportunity to teach the songs to the tutors. This also left some tutors with the uncomfortable feeling that the parents were teaching them. Many commented on the emotion of seeing the parent taking control of the tutoring session for the first time and working confidently with their child.

### Congruency in the Interpretation of Teacher Roles

Families and preservice teachers both commented on the role that teachers play in their culture. Teachers are held in great respect, but at the same time have great responsibility. The preservice teachers saw themselves as needing to have the knowledge and wisdom to give the families advice (*consejos*). As one preservice teacher wrote,

La maestra necesita poseer gran sabiduría en todas las áreas de contenido que enseña para poder explicar al padre en lenguaje cotidiana lo que el niño esta aprendiendo. (*The teacher needs to possess great knowledge/wisdom in all content areas so that she can explain to the parent in everyday language what the child is learning.*)

The preservice teachers also mentioned their growing awareness of their responsibility as educators to make sure that they could live up to the expectations of the families and that they had to make an effort as great as the effort the families were making.

Esto me pone muy nerviosa puesto que la mama de Mario ha puesto una gran responsabilidad en mis manos. Y que debo de hacer un gran esfuerzo para ayudar a Mario. (*This makes me nervous because Mario's mother has placed a great responsibility in my hands. I have to make a great effort to help Mario.*)

Families described good preservice teachers as ones who truly cared about the children:

...es la maestra como le habla ella, como le explica, lo calmada, eso sí es muy buena con la niña. (*It is the way the teacher talks to her, how she explains to her, and the patience she has with her. The teacher is very good with my child.*)

The preservice teachers were aware of the role attributed to them by the families and indicated a desire to fulfill this role. The congruency between families and preservice teachers as to the role of the teacher enhanced family-teacher communication.

### **Importance of Language to Communication and Relationship Building**

Language plays a critical role in building family-school relationships as well as in teaching. In many cases, preservice teachers became aware of how their bilingual ability was of great value when communicating with the families, as they were better able to put the families at ease and explain technical aspects of education. As one teacher wrote, "It (Spanish proficiency) impacted the parents because they felt less intimidated to approach us."

The preservice teachers who were highly proficient in Spanish felt that it was the duty of the teacher to be able to communicate effectively with the families. They placed the responsibility for effective communication on the teacher to explain materials, answer questions, and make the parent comfortable. As one highly Spanish-proficient tutor wrote,

La maestra debe poseer una gran actitud social con los padres y dominar la lengua de ellos. La maestra debe dedicar tiempo a los padres y responder a todas sus dudas. Se necesita invitar al padre que se sienta comfortable hablando con el maestro. Se necesita que el maestro le proporcione ideas al padre para ayudar a su hijo en casa. (*The teacher should be willing to be sociable with parents and know their language. The teacher should dedicate time to the parents and respond to their doubts. They should make the parent comfortable when speaking with the teacher. The teacher should have ideas for the parent to help their child at home.*)

In other cases, preservice teachers became aware of how they may need to improve their ability to communicate with families or how their lack of Spanish proficiency interfered with their communication. As one teacher wrote, "Many of the students have parents that speak Spanish, and I feel that language is something I should be fluent in to communicate with them well."

The preservice teachers who were not fluent in Spanish had to work to overcome barriers to communication; some worked to improve their Spanish, while others relied on more fluent peers and in some cases used the children (who were somewhat fluent in English) to help communicate with the parents.

I really had a difficult time with this (communicating with the parent). Rosa isn't a fluent English speaker, but she is enough where we can understand each other. On the other hand, Rosa's mother only speaks Spanish.

I'm very uncomfortable with my Spanish. I only told the mother hello. I couldn't think of anything else. I feel awful. I wish I were more confident with my language abilities. Maybe I can ask Rosa to let her mother be aware of the activities we are doing.

The families, too, saw the critical role that language plays in society. They wanted their children to become biliterate, maintaining their Spanish and their culture while learning English. One parent reported reading with her child in Spanish at home to maintain the language and culture.

Por que es este...su cultura, es primero lo que va a aprender, el español, para que no lo pierda la cultura que uno le enseña. (*Because it is...their culture...it is the first thing they are going to learn, the Spanish language, so they do not lose it, the culture we teach to them.*)

In fact, some of the Spanish-dominant family members were learning English as well. As one family member mentioned, "Por que en casa, la mía es puro español y pues bueno sí es bueno que aprendan otro idioma, es el que le va a abrir más puertas, ¿verdad?" (*Because at home, in my home, we speak just Spanish and so then it is good for them to learn a second language because it is going to open doors in the future, right?*)

The role of language supports the literature that identifies the need for schools to connect with families in a language that families understand so that they are included in the school process. Families and teachers saw language as critical in enhancing the sharing of information.

## Discussion

The findings support previous research that preservice teachers who have experiences with family involvement during teacher preparation will feel more comfortable interacting with families and value family involvement more than those that lack this preparation (Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Katz, 1999; Morris & Taylor, 1998). The conversation starters or prompts encouraged two-way communication between preservice teachers and families, which previous research indicates is important to building family involvement, especially with Latino families (Feuerstein, 2000; Gaitan, 2004).

The two-way communication and experiences when the families were the experts, such as the sharing of Spanish rhymes and songs, helped preservice teachers understand how the families viewed their roles and the roles of teachers (Broussard, 2003; Keyes, 2002; McCarthy, 2000). After building relationships with the families, the preservice teachers also were less likely to view the families from a deficit perspective, as is sometimes the case with minority families (Peña, 2000; Valdés, 1996; Valencia, 1997).

This research differed from previous research in that it explored mostly Latino/a preservice teachers working with mostly Latino/a families. Making the families comfortable required an effort to address language and cultural issues (Trueba, 1998). Replication of this program is possible, given an effort is made to create an environment which is comfortable for the families. Of the studied preservice teachers, the majority were at least somewhat proficient in both English and Spanish and were able to communicate effectively with the families. In addition, our preservice teachers were familiar with the cultural backgrounds of the parents and thus were able to recognize the families' efforts and signs of respect and pride in their children. The tutors were able to make the parents comfortable and developed strong attachments to the families and their children. The demonstration of care by the tutors toward the children also helped develop a relationship based on shared responsibility for the education of the child. The shared language and culture of the parents and tutors allowed them to go beyond the typical displays of culture, like food and festivals, and into a genuine understanding of the motivations of the tutors and families.

In many cases the type of environment we created would be difficult to replicate, for example, in schools that primarily have monolingual teachers or have multiple languages used by the school's families. However, even in such cases, some lessons from our program could still be useful. One potential lesson from our program is that learning more about the culture and language of participants and including those elements in the program can make family members feel welcome. Translators from the community can be recruited to help with communication between the family members and teachers. Also, demonstration of caring by the program participants is important in making families feel welcome, whatever their language background.

In addition, some aspects of the program have value beyond this unusual setting. The structured experiences and reflections helped preservice teachers consider or reconsider their views of parents and families. Although our preservice teachers had come from similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds as the families, they also had differences in their previous experiences (Richardson, 1999). Some preservice teachers came from different socioeconomic backgrounds from the families; those born and raised in the United States had cultural differences from families recently arrived from Mexico; the educational background of the tutors also was frequently different from the education of the family members. Education in the U.S. generally means being educated in a "monocultural" environment which has worked to assimilate the graduates into a dominant, middle-class, Eurocentric viewpoint (Nieto, 2000).

In developing relationships in school there is the potential for conflict between the teachers and families over the evaluation of the child, expectations

for the family, and linguistic and cultural differences (Chamberlain, 2005). As the relationship between the tutors and parents was not a power relationship, it was possible for each one to support the other. In addition, the reflective elements of the educational process allowed the preservice teachers to explore their feelings about their experiences of working with the families. They were also able to review their own backgrounds, culture, and language and consider how this might impact their involvement with families (Graue, 2005).

The program gave preservice teachers an opportunity to interact in a positive environment with families. Preservice teachers who do not have experience with families in their training report feelings of discomfort about communicating with parents (Rasinski, 2001). Research reports that perhaps the most important lesson in building effective home-school relationships is that teachers have much to learn from the child's first teachers – the parents (McCarthy, 2000). Our program gave preservice teachers such an opportunity.

## Significance

The research reported here extends the current literature by exploring Latino preservice teachers working with Latino families, by describing a tutoring program in which preservice teachers and families interact regularly, and by considering the impact of conversation starters on communication among participants. Future studies could be conducted to look at the effect of similar tutoring programs and conversation starters with preservice teachers and families of different backgrounds. Research also might be conducted into the use of conversation starters with teachers in service who may lack the necessary preparation to feel confident in communicating with families.

Structured opportunities such as our tutoring program allow preservice teachers to explore the cultural and language factors related to communication and the development of relationships with families. Such experiences allow preservice teachers to view diverse family cultures from a strength perspective. Viewing diversity from a strength perspective allows for preservice teachers to move away from the deficit thinking toward families that exists in many of today's schools. Given the changing demographics of U.S. schools, models are needed that prepare teachers to collaborate effectively with diverse families.

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