Contribution of Hispanic Parents' Perspectives to Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

The premise of this paper is that minority parents are untapped sources of knowledge and guidance about how to teach minority children more effectively. Minority parents are uniquely qualified experts on their own children and their own sociocultural context. Nonetheless, teacher preparation programs rarely consider their perspectives in the development of curriculum and experiences for preservice teachers, even though the majority of new teachers report feeling unprepared to teach minority students. Through focus groups with thirty-four parent leaders in a predominantly Mexican American school district, this study elicited information about what Hispanic parents thought new teachers need to know about their children to be more effective teachers. Findings fell into three main themes. First, parents believed that preservice teachers need to know about the local context, not about Latino populations in general. Second, they wanted teachers to understand and value their children as individuals with their own personalities and strengths and weaknesses as learners. The third theme was parents' perception of teachers' low expectations for minority children. Findings and their implications for curriculum content, field experiences, and structure of teacher preparation programs are discussed.

Key Words: Hispanic education, parent involvement, teacher education, minority parents

Introduction

There is a growing awareness of the importance of having teachers understand the sociocultural context of schooling, including the cultural, racial/ethnic, linguistic, and economic diversity in student populations. Demographic projections for student populations and for teachers in the United States indicate that students' sociocultural backgrounds will be increasingly different from those of their teachers. According to Gay (2000), 86% of all elementary and secondary teachers in the United States are European American, while student enrollments are growing in the opposite direction in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture. The number of minority teachers declined from 12% in 1970 to 7% in 1998, while minority student enrollments increased. These patterns are projected to continue. African American students will increase by 8%, Native Americans by 6%, and the greatest increases will be in Asian Americans (by 32%) and Hispanics (by 21%).

Preservice teachers currently enrolled in teacher preparation programs mirror the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds of the current teaching force. This means that the task of teacher preparation is one of educating "typical" preservice teachers—White, monolingual, middle class—to teach an increasingly diverse student body composed of many students of color (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998, p. 89). Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Klein (1997) state:

> If all children are to be effectively taught, teachers must be prepared to address the substantial diversity in experiences children bring with them to school—the wide range of languages, cultures, exceptionalities, learning styles, talents, and intelligences that in turn requires an equally rich and varied repertoire of teaching strategies. In addition, teaching for universal learning demands a highly developed ability to discover what children know and can do, as well as how they think and how they learn, and to match learning and performance opportunities to the needs of individual children. (p. 2)

Many teacher preparation programs have begun to require at least one multicultural course or to incorporate information about cultural differences into methods and field experiences (Sleeter, 2001). Popular texts for educational foundations courses now include information about the nation's largest "minority" populations, especially African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American groups. In spite of the increased attention, however, most teachers still do not feel prepared to deal with cultural differences and implications for teaching children from different cultural backgrounds. According to a national staffing survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, 54%

of all teachers taught culturally diverse students, but only 20% felt well prepared to meet their needs (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 1999).

Meanwhile, minority students continue to lag behind in graduation rates and in academic achievement as measured by standardized tests compared with White majority students. Given the increasing cultural diversity in schools and given that teachers are key to academic success, a major challenge for teacher preparation programs is to find ways of preparing teachers to teach *all* the students in their care, all students from all cultural groups, more effectively. Teacher preparation programs must find ways to help preservice teachers learn about students who are from cultural groups different from their own and to learn about how cultural differences affect teaching and learning. Traditional ways of learning in colleges and universities are not adequately preparing teachers for the diversity within schools, as indicated by teachers who reported feeling unqualified to teach culturally diverse student populations (USDOE, 1999).

Parents as Resources for Teacher Preparation?

The premise of this paper is that parents are promising untapped sources of knowledge and wisdom about teaching minority children. Parents are uniquely qualified experts on their own children and their own sociocultural context. Unfortunately, their perspectives are not usually considered in the development of curriculum and experiences for teacher preparation programs.

Even though it is universally acknowledged among those who study parent involvement (primarily educators, sociologists, and anthropologists) that the involvement of parents in their children's education is important to academic success (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996; Epstein, 1985; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Rioux & Berla, 1993; Valdés, 1996), it is not generally accepted that parents have something to contribute to the *education of teachers*. Instead, parent involvement in educational literature focuses on how to educate parents to do what teachers and schools want them to do. For educators, the literature generally is about how to get parents to support what teachers do in the classroom, or how to become involved in school-initiated activities like parent/teacher organizations. Sociologists, on the other hand, study factors such as socioeconomic levels and resources available to families and how they affect student academic achievement (Schneider & Coleman, 1993). Anthropologists study and write about the values, behaviors, and "cultural capital" that parents and communities provide to their children (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991). All of these perspectives *can* inform teacher preparation, but they are rarely incorporated into teacher preparation programs.

Hispanic Parents

Beyond the literature cited above, there is another growing body of research specific to Hispanic parents and families that indicates they have a wealth of knowledge that could be utilized by teachers in classrooms (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). This knowledge, called "funds of knowledge" by Moll, exists within Hispanic communities; however, teachers and administrators do not seem to be generally aware of it. In some cases, teachers make the effort to learn more about the context of their children's lives, but when they do, that effort is rarely prompted by what they learned in teacher preparation programs. Efforts to involve teachers and preservice teachers in learning from parents and families have generally been on a small scale or are special projects funded by short-term grants (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998; Moll et al., 1992). The real dilemma is how to teach teachers and prospective teachers about what parents know and can contribute to the education of their children on a large scale, impacting what more teachers do in more schools. We must find some way to connect parents' expertise with teachers in a systematic, coherent way in teacher preparation. Leaving this important aspect of teacher education to chance and hoping that teachers will somehow find time to learn from parents after they are in teaching positions will only perpetuate the current state of ignorance about what parents and families can contribute to the education of their children, specifically to the teachers of *their* children.

Other research supports the concept that Hispanic parents have more than knowledge to offer teachers. Studies indicate that, in ongoing interactions with their children, Hispanic parents promote values, attitudes, and dispositions that should result in solid academic achievement for Hispanic children (Perez & Guzman, 1992; Valdés, 1996; Velez & Griego Jones, 1997). For example, they tend to spend time with their children in a variety of activities such as sporting events, entertainment, family outings, even just talking with their children about school, as well as more academic activities such as monitoring homework. These activities, along with a strong sense of family, nurture self-esteem and healthy self-concept that should result in higher academic achievement for more children. What does or doesn't happen in schools to allow the knowledge and nurturing given by most parents to go by the wayside? Why don't teachers utilize what Hispanic parents make available to their children? There have been many efforts to connect parents and teachers, most of them from the perspective of making parents understand what teachers want and how parents can support teachers, but rarely from the perspective of what parents think teachers need to know and be able to do in order to teach their children more effectively. In order to explore what parents have to contribute

to the preparation of teachers and how their knowledge can be integrated into teacher preparation, the following study was conducted in the academic year 2000-01 in a predominantly Mexican American school district.

Parents as Informants to Preservice Teachers

The purpose of the study was to find information that could be used to improve teacher preparation programs in order to better prepare teachers for Hispanic students. The basic research question was, "What do Hispanic parents themselves think teachers should know in order to teach their children more effectively?" Hispanic parents in a predominantly Hispanic, large, urban school district in the southwestern United States were asked directly about what they think preservice teachers should know about their children and how they might teach them. They were asked these questions with the intention of integrating their responses into teacher preparation programs.

Methods and Data Sources

Because the research question related to preparation of teachers, the author looked for parents who would have had opportunities to observe teachers working with their children and consider what teachers should know about their children to teach them. The author knew about parents who were involved in a mathematics awareness project in a local district that was predominantly Mexican American and contacted the parents through the project personnel. The mathematics project was funded by the National Science Foundation for four years and administered by the Department of Mathematics at the local university. Project personnel worked with the school district to develop programs that support parents in becoming active supporters of quality mathematical learning for their children. These programs provided parents with in-depth experiences learning mathematics and learning about strategies used by teachers in teaching mathematics. Through the project, parents became more aware of what was happening in their children's classrooms, and some had occasions to take on leadership roles in working with teachers, administrators, and other parents. Parent participants in the mathematics project were asked to participate in the group interviews, and eventually seven group interviews and one individual interview were conducted with 34 parents of Hispanic children in preK-12 schools. All parents in this study attended mathematics awareness workshops taught by university faculty and some participated in the leadership training workshops provided by the project. Those in the leadership training component of the mathematics project led workshops for other parents and

children and observed in classrooms. Many parents who were involved in this project were already volunteers in schools in other ways, so the project added to their understanding of what goes on in schools. A number were or had been employed as teaching assistants, parent coordinators, or resource personnel at some time in the district. Because of their involvement in the mathematics project and in other school activities, the participants in this study had opportunities to observe teachers in elementary and secondary schools.

Parents in the focus groups interviews, then, were parent leaders from their schools and from their communities. They had perspectives that were informed by membership in the Hispanic community and by their work and observations in classrooms. The workshops they participated in also taught them about methods of teaching mathematics and how children learn. The parents were not necessarily "typical" of all parents in the district because they were more closely involved with teachers and classrooms than most parents. However, their involvement in the mathematics project and other school activities made them particularly qualified to answer questions about the preparation of teachers for their children.

All parents in the study had children in the district and in some cases had children who had already graduated. Many had children at every level—elementary, middle, and high school—and with the exception of two families, all of their children had attended district schools for most of their school years. A few families had a child in magnet schools in another district, a few had tried parochial schools at one time, and a child in one family received home schooling even though the other children in the family attended the district schools. About a quarter of the participants had attended district schools themselves and graduated from the local high school.

Open-ended questions asked parents what they thought preservice teachers need to know about their children and how to work with them in order to be more effective. Other questions asked parents to describe experiences with their children's teachers and schools. They were also asked to comment on a perception commonly held by educators that Hispanic parents do not value education and schooling. The same interview protocol was followed in all sessions and started by asking parents how many children they had in schools and where they attended. The interview ended by asking them what they would tell preservice teachers about their children if they could be guest speakers in the researcher's university courses.

Group interviews averaged an hour and were held in schools, the public library, and in two cases, at parents' homes. The parent who was interviewed individually could not make the scheduled group session, and so was interviewed at another time at the parent's home. Group session participants tended to be

clustered by school, because the mathematics workshops were organized by school, and parents worked in teams from each school. All of the group interviews, however, had several schools represented in the session because parents had children who attended more than one school. The focus group study was funded by a research grant from the local university and parents were paid stipends for their participation in interviews.

Sessions were conducted in English and/or Spanish, according to parents' choice. Five of the parents were dominant in Spanish, three did not know Spanish, and the rest were bilingual to varying degrees of proficiency. Two participants were fathers; the rest were mothers. Although the initial intent was to interview Hispanic parents, two participants in the group interviews were European Americans married to Hispanics (and so had Hispanic children).

Data Analysis and Findings

Session audiotapes and transcriptions were analyzed for elements, patterns, and themes. Responses to each question were examined within each focus group and items were identified, sorted, and categorized within each response. Then responses to each question were compared and contrasted across focus groups, identifying commonalities and differences. The patterns that emerged across focus groups are reported here, including patterns that surfaced beyond direct answers to protocol questions. In order to check accuracy and corroborate the author's interpretation of data, initial drafts of the findings were given to participants from each focus group. The author then met with them to discuss research results and incorporate their insights before disseminating results (Schensul, LeCompte, Nastasi, & Borgatti, 1999). A group of parents who were interviewed actually participated in presenting results at a national research conference. Findings were then organized and coded for their implications for teacher preparation.

Experiences with Teachers

Responding to initial questions about their experiences with or observing teachers, all of the parents said they routinely contacted teachers because they felt it was important to "stay on top" of their children's progress in school. All participants had initiated visits to teachers and/or principals to inquire about their children's classwork, homework, or behavior at some time. Even the parents who reported they hadn't always felt comfortable because of language barriers said they contacted a teacher to "check" on their students and to let their children know they were interested in their schooling.

They reported that at the elementary level, schools also routinely contacted them through notes in English and Spanish about school activities and that the schools held parent/teacher conferences which afforded opportunities to discuss their children's work. Depending on the elementary school, some praised particular teachers for their efforts to reach parents and keep in contact with them. They gave examples of teachers who sent postcards to families before school started to welcome them back to the new school year and invite them to visit their child's classroom. One told how impressed she was when a teacher was invited to a family celebration and attended. A recurring comment was that it was important for *teachers* to encourage parents and to initiate contact with them.

In descriptions given by parents, they were generally more satisfied with contacts with elementary schools and teachers than with secondary. With few exceptions, parents were dissatisfied with the type of contact at the middle and high school level, as well as with the amount of contact. In all cases at the secondary level, contacts were initiated by the school only when students were "in trouble." In several sessions, parents reported that they had waited for information about the schedule for parent/teacher conferences, but had not received any. They finally contacted the teacher directly or sent word with children that they wanted to know when the conferences were to be held. They were disappointed that there were no regular parent/teacher conferences. Conferences were only held if the student was having difficulty or if there were behavioral problems. In one description, the parent said:

> You're expecting to go and be able to meet the teachers, but if your kids are getting good grades like that…the main teacher will only call you, so you don't even get to talk to the other teachers…[the main teacher was the homeroom teacher] and I'm waiting and waiting for the note so that we can meet all the…you know, talk to the teachers and we only got [shrug]. Last year I met with her homeroom teacher…I didn't get to meet with the other teachers but I got to meet with the homeroom teacher. This year, I don't know, they just called…and the only reason that they called is because I told my daughter to go and ask how come they hadn't set a conference and had they forgotten about us, and so because the kids are getting good grades, they didn't even—you know, it wasn't a problem, but I think you should still be able to talk and meet with the teachers.

The others in the group agreed, one saying, "I felt uncomfortable because I didn't get to go and talk to the teachers. I didn't like that." Still another stated emphatically, "I didn't like it either." Someone else declared, "They just want

to meet with the trouble makers, with the kids that are having problems." Another said, "They didn't even call me. I never knew what happened."

Parents stressed that they wanted to know what was going on and didn't want to wait until there were problems. Most parents seemed to believe that secondary teachers were less interested in talking with parents than elementary teachers, that secondary teachers did not view contact with parents as part of their professional responsibility. Parents also observed, however, that their children in general did not want their active participation at the secondary schools like they did in elementary school. With a few exceptions, they noted that children seemed embarrassed to have them at school, especially observing in classrooms, and that they were afraid other students might tease them. Parents recognized the life changes that middle school students were going through and understood that they were trying to distance themselves from parents as part of growing up, but at the same time parents stressed how important it was that they know what their children are doing in school at this tumultuous developmental stage of their lives. Several commented that they noticed behavioral changes in their children when they entered middle school, such as being less interested in school work or changes in friends, and they wanted to talk with teachers about their concerns. Many parents noticed a drop in grades from elementary to middle school, and this was another concern they wanted to discuss with teachers. In several sessions, concern about the middle grades was a dominant theme. Some observed that if students don't make it through middle school, if they get turned off, or if they don't get the education they need then, it is too late for them in high school.

What Teachers Should Know about Hispanic Children

In response to the open-ended questions about what preservice teachers need to know about their children, two main themes surfaced in all group sessions and the individual interview. First, preservice teachers need to learn about Hispanic neighborhoods, culture, and language; second, preservice teachers should learn about and value children's individual personalities and differences. In the descriptions of experiences with schools and teachers, and in response to the question about Hispanic parents' caring about education, a third theme emerged. This theme related to parents' perceptions of manifestations and effects of low teacher expectations. The first and second categories relate to *what* teachers should know, value, and use in teaching their children. The third category deals with perceptions of *how* teachers treat their children and, more importantly, how they should treat them.

Neighborhoods, Culture, and Language

In the first category of what teachers should learn about their children, parents overwhelmingly said that preservice teachers should get to know the neighborhood and community surrounding their school district. They said that preservice teachers should not make assumptions about the children and their prior knowledge and backgrounds. They gave concrete suggestions for how preservice teachers could learn about children outside of schools and classrooms, such as volunteering in community centers or just visiting them, working with local clubs such as the Boys and Girls Club, helping with sports events or in local libraries, and eating in local restaurants.

A common perception was that new teachers (and sometimes experienced ones) seemed to be afraid of the Hispanic neighborhoods and sometimes "didn't give us a chance." A mother's description illustrates the general perception of how teachers thought of the community:

> I think a lot of teachers that come to the south side are from the north side or the east side…and I think they're afraid of our community… they don't know our culture and they're really afraid…I can say it, you know, cause I know they've said it, they're afraid to come down here after school—as long as they're in school, they're fine, but once that four o'clock comes around, they want to get out as fast as they can. They're afraid to be here at nighttime. So you wonder if that affects…well, you know, these kids, I gotta just teach them what they know and get out of here…I just wonder sometimes how much they're giving to the kids.

There was a nodding of heads and acclamations of agreement when the parent made the comment about teachers being afraid and wanting to get out of the area as fast as they could. The group also laughed ruefully as they shook their heads at the idea that teachers were so afraid of their community. In some of the sessions, a few parents expressed sadness and sometimes surprise at the stories of other parents about teachers' perceptions of their communities, but no one disagreed. In some cases, parents said their elementary school had veteran teachers who might not be afraid, but even there, they still "had a few" in their school who didn't want to be in their community. Parents sometimes elaborated on the effects of teachers being afraid of their community and wanting to get out at 4:00 p.m. They mused that the attitude on the part of teachers could affect the children and how they perceived themselves. Parents' concerns were two-fold: how the teachers' attitude affects the children's self-concepts, and how much teachers were disposed to give of themselves when they didn't want to be there. They evidently had thought about how teachers' attitudes would influence their teaching before these interviews.

Recognition and preservation of cultural norms, values, and practices, including language, were important to all participants. For example, one explained that even though children and teachers share the same classroom all day, teachers have to remember that the child's parents are Mexican American and may have different cultural expectations and experiences from those of the teacher. Children often have to live in two different cultural contexts, that of the Hispanic neighborhood and that of the school. These two contexts don't always value or expect the same things. It is important to note, however, that even though parents thought preservice teachers should get to know the local context of schools, they stressed that their children had the same basic needs as all other children anywhere. They seemed proud of the identifiable cultural differences in their communities. For example, a mother who had grown up in a different part of the city commented about this school district,

> …and I find that over here, there's more culture. When you go to the other schools, its like, you're Mexican? So what? You forget that. Now you're in a different realm. I love it here…I want to learn my Spanish again because I grew up without that.

Another parent volunteer at the high school described the community:

> We have a very close-knit bilingual unit here, where a lot of the people that work here—and like the parents—have been here their whole lives and you're getting grandkids of people that graduated from here, and so people come back here and they just expect things to be done a certain way and you just feel that sometimes somebody from another place, that didn't have this close-knit, this closeness, wouldn't understand…I don't know that that's a bad thing…I'm not a good example of it. I'm not from this area, but I noticed it…everybody knows everybody.

The parent, who had grown up in a different part of the city, gave the following specific example of the closeness she was talking about:

> For instance…this is like a village, you know how Mrs. Clinton always said it takes a village to raise a child? Well, I think that we do have a village here, because its not your mom wanting to find out what's going on…its your uncle or its your cousin or its your grandparents, or even the neighbor. Many, many times we have the neighbor come and pick up the student when there's a problem or if there's an illness…or sometimes even for a change of clothing, it's the neighbor. There's a lot of people that that student can rely on and those people will go to bat for him, plus also be on his back to make sure that he does what he's supposed to do…I noticed it right away because I didn't have that at my high school. I never saw that.

The need to understand children's language backgrounds was another aspect of culture that emerged in all sessions, although it was more prominent in sessions where parents from bilingual schools participated. For a number of parents, maintaining or learning Spanish was important, although language was discussed more by parents who were dominant or proficient in Spanish. The Spanish dominant parents in one bilingual school in particular discussed language at length. They were very pleased with the school and with most of the bilingual teachers. The teachers were known to the parents, and parents were open about which ones they requested for their children. One popular teacher was described as "tough, but good." They talked about the progress their children were making in learning English and in Spanish. Some children were doing very well, but a few were having difficulty and one parent worried that a child was losing Spanish. Bilingual teachers who communicated with them made them feel welcome and, in a sense, "empowered." In one case, the family had moved to this district from California and the mother compared the school there with the school in this district. She emphatically believed this school was superior and that "los maestros apoyan a los Latinos" (the teachers supported Latinos). The Spanish speaking mothers were aware of the ballot proposition in Arizona to eliminate bilingual education and warned the group to vote or they would lose the right to communicate with teachers if bilingual education was banned. She, and the others, were very appreciative of bilingual teachers who supported their children and were able to communicate with parents. One stated that in the schools in this area "todas las maestras deben saber español" (All the teachers should know Spanish). Parents thought of maintaining Spanish as important in communication with parents and other family members and integral to understanding and retaining the children's ethnic identity as well. The more Spanish dominant parents seemed to be, the more often they raised the importance of having their children maintain the language to communicate with them. Parents who were bilingual or dominant in English also mentioned language differences, including Asian languages, as something that new teachers need to be aware of and respect.

Individual Personalities and Differences

In this second category of what preservice teachers should learn about, parents talked about children's fears, worries, and aspirations. Parents urged new teachers to be accepting and open to differences, to individuals. One mother stated, "I would say for any teacher who is coming up, who is getting ready to come into a school is that, you know, don't pre-judge these kids because they're the south side…be aware that every child is unique, and every child does have

the potential…we as the adults have to make the difference in them." Several suggested that new teachers follow the example of some veteran teachers who "go the extra mile" to understand the home context and circumstances so that they don't pre-judge children and assume motives on the part of children and parents. Since many of those interviewed were volunteers in schools, they recounted a number of experiences where children were misunderstood by unknowing teachers. Their descriptions alone can be good lessons for teacher candidates. For example, a Spanish speaking mother believed that, beyond the language, teachers should know "cada personalidad y como trabajar con tu nino" (know each personality and how to work with your child). She gave an example of her son who had started school in a northern state and did not know Spanish as well as the rest of the students in the local schools who were dominant in Spanish. There were occasions when the children made fun of her son because he didn't know some Spanish words. The teacher did not do anything about this, so the mother asked to talk with the class and explain that her child was trying to learn Spanish just as they were trying to learn English. She thought that the teacher did not understand how hurt her child was, why he was hurt, and what the other children were doing to cause the hurt. The teacher made the assumption that the child was fluent in Spanish because he was placed in the bilingual classroom and knew *some* Spanish. The teacher didn't realize he was struggling with Spanish.

Parents talked about individual children's different ways of learning, different "learning styles," such as "hands-on" preferences. An example was a parent who talked about her child who sometimes didn't look like he was paying attention, but in fact, "his wheels were turning." She told a story about her son when he was in kindergarten, relating how his kindergarten teacher told her at a parent conference that it had taken her almost all year to realize that the child really was learning. The child never showed signs that he was listening to all around him, but he was always attending. The teacher had not realized that and had not given him credit for learning, because he appeared to be attending to something else. The point was that the teacher could have found this out earlier and easier by just talking with the mother about the child's way of learning. Parents didn't understand why teachers wouldn't know about individual differences in development and ways of doing things.

In the same vein of understanding and accepting children as individuals, parents sympathized with the difficult job of teachers, saying that "times certainly have changed since I was a teenager…if I were going to school to learn how to teach, I wouldn't know how to relate to the kids now because its just so different. It's almost like they aren't prepared for what they face." They urged teachers to "get personal" and tell about themselves, about what it was like to

go to college, and about their hobbies and personal interests. Having teachers establish and maintain personal relationships with children seemed to be very important to the parents.

Perceptions, Manifestations, and Effects of Low Expectations

In talking about how they perceived that teachers treated their children, parents often expressed frustration and concern about the generally low level of expectations teachers and administrators held for their children. When they talked about how teachers perceived their children and parents, they were more emotional and intense than about any other topic. A frequent comment was that "Hispanic kids are bright" but unchallenged. One mother described the children as "uncut diamonds," but no one wanted "to polish them." Although a number of parents complimented individual teachers, they worried that the children were not pushed to succeed or excel in general. One mother gave an example of her son who was "very intelligent in math," but was basically ignored by the teacher. The mother believed that because he and another student were so intelligent and capable, the teacher just let them go off on their own while he dealt with the other students who were having difficulty and causing him trouble. The two children basically taught themselves. There was no challenge for them, even in high school, and the teacher did not have the mindset of getting the "smart" students ready for college. She said:

> I have a son that is *very* intelligent in math. He had a teacher that never challenged him. There were students that would just go goofing around all the time, but because he was so smart, he (the teacher) let him and this other girl just go off on their own so they…had to learn math on their own, they had their own thing, while he kind of taught the other kids and if he didn't have patience for them, he'd just kind of ignore them and do something else…so that was kind of sad, knowing that that was happening at high school level when they should be getting them ready for college if that's where they want to go, and there was never any challenge for him, there was just like that lack of, "well, ok, you're smart so you're going to learn on your own, so I don't have to bother with you."

Another mother described a similar situation with her son who was in 5th grade but had been ignored since 2nd grade. "He'll challenge you, all the way…I mean, he wants to know, 2 plus 2 is 4 because…? Not because you said, he wants to know why…he wants to work it out…he wants to experience it, he wants to explore it for himself, and so that's what most teachers do with

him (ignore him)." Instead of putting bright students in gifted and talented programs, these parents believed the teachers just chose to ignore them. The following comment summarizes the feeling of many parents: "I don't believe I've ever heard a teacher say they expected a lot from our kids, that they expected them to go on to college."

Parents were very much aware of the poor reputation the district had for academic achievement as measured by standardized tests and tended to blame the media for bad publicity. They seemed to have an intuitive realization that children in wealthier districts received more resources and some said they got "the best teachers." Parents who had attended district elementary and secondary schools themselves made the point that low achievement and expectations had been around for a long time. To illustrate, one told her story and that of her husband when they were in high school:

> I can tell you, because I grew up on the east side of town, and my husband grew up over here, ok? He transferred to east high school, because of me, of course, and when he went—now this goes way back, to the eighties—when he went to east high school, he was so low…He felt like the biggest outsider and I couldn't understand. I was a freshman at the time. He was a senior, and its like, what do you mean, you don't know this stuff? That just shows you that the education hasn't been there for this side of town for a long time.

As this parent talked, the emotional climate in the room heightened and another mother spoke up, her voice full of emotion. "And you know what? Our children are just as bright and we just haven't given them the chance." Others affirmed, "That's right."

There were suggestions that schools needed to pay more attention to upgrading programs for students, for making the curriculum more challenging. One mother put it this way:

> They have certain programs available that are very good, like they have that math program (general murmuring of agreement from the group), but they only tell like three or four kids out of the class. And they have other programs, too, and maybe its financially not in their budget, but if they were to just have things available to prepare kids, you know, like for the harder math—every year, you know, how its math—they dread it, its like the most dreaded thing they have. I think the school district should have more programs available to more kids, not just a few out of each class…it's so weird because they have magnet schools and they have regular schools.

Regarding magnet schools, parents questioned why some schools received

more resources than others. "Why can't they all get the funds?" "Why can't they all get two teachers a day, an assistant teacher and another, you know? That is so wrong."

In some cases, when children received lower grades in middle school than they had received in elementary school, some parents expressed disappointment, even anger, when they contacted teachers and were told that they should be happy with grades like Cs. The following sequence of comments from three mothers illustrates their concern:

> When my son brought home a C, I called immediately and I said, why does he have a C? And he's like, well, you should be glad that he has a C and I said why? Well, most kids—that's what they're getting. And I said, wait a minute, my child is not a C child, so don't tell me that.

Another mother chimed in,

> My son got a C, too, and I went in too and asked what's going on here? Well, it's a passing grade…and I said, no, no, not in my house its not and they're like, well, it's passing. What's wrong with it?

A third said, "They think that that's good enough for this area and be glad that it's a C."

The consensus seemed to be that "As you move up into the grade levels, the middle and high school teachers, we've lost something completely;" "They just don't care…very rare that we find a teacher that really rolls up their sleeves… who really cares and has high expectations of the children."

When asked to elaborate on examples of the expectations teachers have for their children, one answered:

> I don't know that they (the teachers) have ever come out, directly themselves, and said "we expect for your children to excel"…we've never heard, "that's what we want for your kids." Its just, "we have the open house, you go look at the classrooms."

A follow-up comment: "In the elementary levels, (we) have heard...but in middle schools, as long as he finishes his work, he can draw." Another said:

> In high school, they go to the counselor and then its like, "I see on her records that she really has no plans for the future right now, so maybe she doesn't need to take this extra math." I've heard that…don't tell me she doesn't need to, push her, make her, don't let her take the lesser way out.

Although the interview questions asked about what teachers should know in order to be more effective with Hispanic children, comments did not always directly relate the low expectations of teachers to the children's ethnicity.

Rather, comments were more related to the economic status of the community and parents seemed reluctant to ascribe behaviors of teachers to ethnicity. When their comments compared their district to other districts, they talked in terms of differences in economic backgrounds, not necessarily ethnic backgrounds. A few of the parents who knew about schooling in Mexico, though, felt that schools in this U.S. city were not as demanding as those in Mexico.

Hispanic Parents Do Care about Education

When parents were asked about the perception commonly expressed by educators and teacher candidates that Hispanic parents don't care about education, they overwhelmingly responded that they do indeed care. A mother summed it up by saying, "I believe every parent wants their child to be something." The participants themselves were examples of parents who cared and acted upon that caring by volunteering and taking a very close interest in what their children and teachers were doing. Several explanations were given for why parents might not seem to "care" about the schooling of their children. For one thing, they said that many Hispanic parents did not understand the educational system well enough to participate or show their caring. Parents who had not gone through the educational system could not know what was expected, or they might have had bad experiences that caused them to avoid the schools.

Another explanation was that there were many very young parents who really did not know about parenting and were struggling just to survive. The following comments from a father explain:

> It's a different age now. When I was going to elementary school, mama was 50 some years old and now you get parents in their 20s…young parents. I mean, I make it a point to try to go to my children's elementary school. Any time their grades drop below a B, we're in that school. I mean, we're not afraid of education…I've got two degrees…it's not a thing of being afraid of it, I guess it's just, maybe we're labeled as…not caring.

This parent realized that he had some education and life experience that many young parents don't have. He was not going to be intimidated by the system or by teachers, but he thought others who were still children themselves might be intimidated. In another session a mother offered,

> You know what I think happens is that a lot of these parents were parents when they were very young, you know, very young teenagers—fourteen, fifteen—I mean it happens a lot. They just didn't know how

> to do it, but the teachers, instead of seeing it as something negative, you know, what they think of Hispanic, they should try to motivate them more to try to help out more and to become more involved.

Parents expected teachers, who were well-educated, to understand the economic and social conditions that hindered parents, especially those who were just beyond childhood themselves, from actively participating in school activities. A third explanation was that many parents work, even at two jobs, and simply don't have time to participate in school activities. They seemed disappointed that teachers would not understand these conditions and that they would make assumptions about the motivation of parents. They often talked about how important it was for teachers to "teach from the heart" and seemed to view teaching as a vocation. They held teachers to high standards, standards that involved caring and devotion to children and their profession.

In most sessions, someone expressed concern or questions about some parents from Mexico who took their children out of school for trips to Mexico. Some didn't understand this, but others explained that the parents from Mexico really just didn't understand the harm they were doing to their children. They reasoned that the parents who took their children out of school to visit Mexico had not attended much school themselves in either country, and so did not realize what their children missed and how difficult it was for them when they came back to the classroom. When parents talked about caring and valuing education, they did make some distinction between those families who were recent arrivals from Mexico and those who had been in the city for generations. There seemed to be a difference in their descriptions between recent immigrants and those who grew up in this country, relative to what each group knew and understood about American schools. In some cases, the parents responded to the question about Hispanic parents' caring about education by talking about newly arrived Mexicans, assuming the question referred to these recent immigrants.

One father's suggestion that new teachers set aside their preconceived ideas and "take a look at some of the people in the neighborhood, at what they've done, what they aspire to do" illustrates an opinion that was voiced in every focus group. Another father's comment is illustrative of another common perception about parents, "I think that we're just a little intimidated of it...math or doing something different" and so were perceived by teachers as not caring. They suggested that teachers might think that parents don't care because they didn't come in to schools to talk with teachers. But, they stated there were reasons parents didn't come. The following sums up their descriptions:

> I think that most parents, I mean, now I work as a parent involvement (coordinator), but I volunteered for five years…its hard getting parents in there because they feel that, that pre-judgement. Most teachers feel the Hispanic parents aren't—their involvement in education is not important to them—and that is so incorrect. I think that the parents sense that, I mean, they know. Teachers kind of talk down to parents. Even working in the school system, teachers talk down to parents and that's humiliating, and that's a very humbling circumstance that most parents don't want to go back for.

Mothers who worked at the school and felt comfortable there realized that not all parents could be expected to feel that comfort level. "All of us (participants in session) are Teaching Assistants at the elementary school, and we deal with the parents and I get a lot of parents that return…(they) don't know how to do the homework and this is for first grade. I make it ok and write back to them and write back a little note about how to do it. For next time." Another mother sympathized with parents, saying:

> The pre-judgement before you even get there…your stomach starts churning, and I mean, I think that's how most parents feel. Its like, oh, I gotta go in and talk to the teacher at the teacher conference and they're going to look at me like I don't know anything and regardless of…its already there.

The final word was that "Every parent wants something better for their child" and parents realize that education was the way to get that. Not all parents, however, know what to do to help their children, while others simply couldn't take the time from work to be in schools. Parents in the interviews did not perceive the majority of teachers to be willing to help parents know how to participate in schooling. They suggested that if teachers thought parents didn't care, then teachers had the responsibility to educate parents about why they needed to care, about why it is important for them to be involved in their children's schooling. If parents don't know this, teachers needed to let them know, not just allow them to disengage from their child's educational process. The parents' main point was that if teachers think that parents don't care or are not participating, they should not just accept that. It is the teacher's responsibility to help parents understand the importance of their involvement in their children's education, and it pays dividends for the teacher. Lack of participation or involvement in school activities should not be mistaken for lack of caring.

Discussion

Content of Teacher Preparation Courses

The purpose of this study was to learn something that would improve teacher preparation and facilitate preservice teachers' learning about how to be more effective teachers of Hispanic children. Parents of Hispanic children were viewed as experts on their children and, in this case, were leaders who had opportunities for observing teachers. Their responses produced implications for course content in teacher preparation programs and reinforce what others (Garcia, 2001; Perez & Guzman, 1992) have said is important in teaching Hispanic students, that teachers need to understand their communities. An important finding here was that *parents were specific about new teachers needing to know about their neighborhood community, about the local context,* not about Hispanic populations in general or even about Mexican American culture and/or history. This suggests that teacher preparation programs could take advantage of local settings and provide systematic, in-depth experiences for preservice teachers to really get to know a specific population, in and out of school. Parents did not focus on characteristics or traits of Hispanic culture in general. They talked about overcoming fear and getting to know those who live in the community in a personal way. This is important because the "multicultural course requirement" in most teacher preparation programs deals with characteristics, values, beliefs, and behaviors of major cultural groups in a more global way. Rather than relying on course content and texts that discuss multicultural education and all the cultural groups in general, it may be a more profound learning experience to focus on one population in a specific local neighborhood, even if a preservice teacher doesn't get a teaching position there. The experience of immersing oneself in a community different than the one the teacher knows may teach someone how to learn about others. It seems that if a teacher preparation program could develop a model for how to learn about a given community, it might be more helpful to preservice teachers than asking them to learn all they can about the diversity of racial/ethnic groups in schools. A shortcoming of multicultural texts and courses for preservice students, minority or majority, is that they often provide information that is disconnected from their own realities. Immersing themselves in another community's reality and identifying for themselves principles of learning about other groups may help them in their future careers regardless of where they find jobs.

Preservice teachers also need to better understand how economic conditions affect children's learning, according to the parents. Programs, then, should incorporate more information about economic principles, as well as

an immersion experience in a different socioeconomic community. Since most preservice teachers come from middle class backgrounds, regardless of race/ethnicity, they are not likely to understand how poverty impacts a child's schooling. Another important point for new teachers is that they recognize the importance of having teachers make the first move in getting to know about their students and their context, especially with parent populations that don't understand the U.S. system and expectations of its schools.

Experience in the Community

Field experiences are another aspect of teacher preparation programs that have tremendous potential to teach about families and communities, what they value, and what resources they make available to their children. The importance of this, too, is documented in the literature (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998) but is made more powerful by the parents' voices inviting a kind of active investigation into their community. Teacher education programs need to make sure that classroom placements for methods field experiences and student teaching include the diversity of students and also include parents in some concrete, meaningful way. In the southwestern United States, that means placements should introduce preservice teachers to Hispanic, specifically Mexican American, students, as well as other cultural groups that make up sizable percentages of the student populations. However, placements themselves are not enough. Follow up discussion and reflection about cultural and linguistic differences with faculty *and parents* who can answer questions and help preservice teachers understand the context of schools for different cultural groups needs to be part of the regular teacher preparation program. Parents, particularly parent leaders like the ones in this study, could be thought of as bridges between preservice teachers and other parents through invitations to be adjunct instructors in a teacher preparation program—not necessarily to talk about parent involvement, but to help teachers understand more about their children and their communities.

Leadership Development

The mathematics project gave parents an opportunity to develop leadership abilities and learn more about teaching and about teachers. Participation in the mathematics project also enhanced parents' role as a link to other parents by engaging them to teach other parents mathematics. Teacher preparation programs could emulate aspects of the mathematics project and introduce parents and teachers to each other through other content areas such as reading,

language arts, science, social studies, and fine arts. Parents could receive the same type of training in content and pedagogy and thus better understand a teacher's job. The parent leaders who are interested in any given content area could then be links to other parents in helping them understand expectations of the schools. Involving more Hispanic parents who are interested in knowing more about academic content could be a worthwhile investment, even though it might just involve a few. One of the frustrations with some parent involvement programs has been the small numbers who can or will actively participate (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). Perhaps the focus should be on those who are able and willing to take leadership roles, who then in turn reach out to other parents, instead of trying to get all people directly involved in school activities.

Teacher Beliefs and Expectations

Parents identified how low or neutral expectations came across to them in the way teachers thought of grades for children in this district, in their lack of concern about talking with parents at the secondary level, and in the general lack of encouragement to take demanding courses and go on to higher education. These parents challenged teachers by questioning the grades and by making efforts to "stay on top" of what their children were doing in schools. Findings suggest that *the expectations teachers have for Hispanic students are or can be influenced by the contacts and relationships teachers have with parents* and *that teachers' beliefs about Hispanic parents can influence their expectations for Hispanic students.* This is probably the most important learning from this study, and the relationship between teachers' beliefs about Hispanic parents and expectations for Hispanic children is the focus of continuing ethnographic research in this district. When teachers believe that Hispanic parents don't care about their children's education, they aren't likely to feel accountable to the Hispanic parents. Believing that Hispanic parents don't care about education gives teachers an excuse for not working harder to ensure that all children are learning. The chronic underachievement of Hispanic students can then be attributed to parents instead of to the schools, and in fact, often is. If low expectations are a problem in educating Hispanic children, nothing will change unless the beliefs that preservice teachers have are examined and systematically addressed, especially the beliefs about whether Hispanic parents care about education. This belief is so pervasive in American society that it will be a difficult one for preservice teachers to overcome.

Parents' perspectives suggest that beliefs and attitudes of teacher candidates about Hispanic populations need to be addressed as an integral part of teacher

preparation programs, not just as a by-product of increased awareness and knowledge. Teacher educators have increasingly added multicultural content to courses, and to a lesser extent, provided multicultural field experiences, but few programs directly address the beliefs and attitudes held by preservice teachers toward children from cultural backgrounds different from those of the teachers, especially of racial and ethnic minority groups. Influencing beliefs and attitudes may be the most difficult part of preparing teachers for cultural diversity, but many teacher educators are convinced that beliefs of incoming teachers should be the focus for change in teacher preparation, because they influence what preservice teachers accept from courses and field experiences (Richardson, 1996). There is ample evidence that shows beliefs, whether about children, subjects, the learning process, or anything else, also help determine expectations teachers have for children (Causey, Thomas, Armento, 2000; Hill, 2000; Zeichner, Melnick, & Gomez, 1996).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to learn something from parents that could inform teacher preparation. The parents in the study were in unique positions to observe and interact with teachers and so to have informed opinions about the preparation of teachers. What did these parents have to say about what should be included in teacher preparation? They told us teachers should know more about their children as members of a community, of a neighborhood that apparently teachers did not understand and were afraid of, and as individual personalities with unique learning styles that teachers should be able to identify. These ideas fit with professional standards and ideas of what teachers should be able to do. Parents were not asking for something that is out of line with the goals of teacher education programs. However, from the parents' descriptions, new teachers were not oriented toward learning about their children and their context, nor were they getting to know their children as individual personalities.

These parents, who clearly cared about education and were actively involved in their children's schools and schooling, did not feel that children from their district were held in high esteem by teachers. Teachers' beliefs about Hispanics in general could be negating their ability to expect a lot from the children of these parents, who in many respects were models of what educators want parents to be.

The United States is faced with an urgent need to halt the alarming dropout rates and chronic underachievement of Hispanic students. Given our schools' historic inability to educate all Hispanic children, and given the

burgeoning numbers of Hispanic students in the nation's schools, teacher education programs must do something differently in order to change the situation for Hispanic students. Because teachers are key to improving schools, the knowledge and beliefs of the incoming teaching force must be addressed. It is important to find untapped expertise to address the knowledge base, understanding, beliefs, and attitudes of incoming teachers to make them more effective in teaching Hispanic children. Consulting Hispanic parents, the experts on Hispanic children, has the potential to make a significant contribution in reforming teacher preparation so that all teachers will be better prepared to teach Hispanic children effectively.

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