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Article 70

Facilitating the Academic Success of Latino Students: Practical Applications for School Counselors

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Researchers have established the utility of culturally responsive school counselors in the facilitation of academic and personal success among Latino students (Beals, Beals, & Cordova de Sartori 1999; Casas & Vasquez, 1996). Cultural differences, when not addressed responsively, can inhibit student achievement. For example, students who function from a collectivist perspective at home can find it difficult if not impossible to achieve in a school environment that espouses individual and competitive values (Gay, 2000). Current theory and research indicate that children will benefit from interventions designed to increase parental involvement and decrease cultural disparities between schools and the homes of students. The need for interventions has been exacerbated by the increasing diversification of the student demography and the disparate academic outcomes among minority student populations. Specifically, Latino students have continued to display lower levels of academic achievement and higher drop-out rates than other student groups (Aud, Fox, KewalRamani, & NCES, 2010). These educational

disparities have correlates in later development as well. Research indicates that Latinos continue to be underrepresented in a variety of professional domains, such as academia and law (Yowell, 2002). Instead, Hispanics/Latinos are employed primarily in service and labor sectors (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Improving the academic performance of Latino students requires cooperation from all members of the educational microcosm. School counselors are well positioned to lead efforts to assuage the barriers that many Latino students face (Casas, Furlong, & Esparza, 2003). Recently, researchers have focused on the impact of parental involvement and culturally responsive teaching on the academic performance of Latino students (Chun & Dickson, 2010). This article will summarize this research and operationalize the findings by presenting practical and efficacious techniques for school counselors to facilitate student success. Specifically, strategies for promoting the involvement of Latino parents in their students' academic pursuits and enhancing the provision of culturally responsive teaching will be presented.

According to the American School Counselors Association (ASCA), it is incumbent upon school counselors to assist students in achieving desired competencies, coordinate systematic individual student planning, meet students' immediate needs, and establish, maintain, and enhance systems of support (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Citing the unique needs and concerns of Latino students and families, Villalba, Akos, Keeter, and Ames (2007) presented culturally appropriate school strategies that aligned with the ASCA National Model to promote Latino student achievement. Recently, Chun and Dickson (2010) presented an empirically supported model of Hispanic/Latino academic performance. This model suggests that interventions designed to promote parental support and enhance culturally responsive teaching can lead to an enhanced sense of school-belonging and greater academic self-efficacy, which in turn leads to greater academic performance. Hence, parents and teachers can impact students' academic performance through parental involvement in academic pursuits and culturally responsive teaching practices.

The importance of parent involvement in students' academic process has been well documented across the general population of students. Parent involvement has been conceptualized as parents conveying to their children their expectations and value of education (Ibanez, Kuperminc, Jurkovic, & Perilla, 2004) and by parental communications with teachers (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001). Parent involvement has been found to be positively related to academic motivation (Ibanez, et al., 2004), school engagement (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow, & Fendrich, 1999; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992), school belonging (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008) and academic performance (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Efforts to improve academic performance must encourage the support of parents.

According to reports from The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003), Hispanic and Black parents participate in school meetings and events, serve as a volunteer or on school committees significantly less often than White parents. Immigrant parents have also been found less likely than United States born parents to attend meetings regarding their children's education. Other studies that have examined parental involvement in activities both at home and at school have not found differences in involvement across racial or ethnic groups (Desimone, 1999).

Parental involvement can be defined differently in different cultures (Niemeyer, et al., 2009). Specifically, many Hispanic parents may be more involved at home than at school and this behavior may be viewed as Hispanic parents being less involved with their child's education (Niemeyer, Wong, & Westerhaus, 2009). Moreover, Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls, and Nero (2010) found that Latino parents valued both social and academic success as equally important in their child's well being. They also noted that involvement of other significant people (i.e., extended family members) was more common in the Latino culture compared to the White-American culture.

Niemeyer et al. (2009) examined the relationship of familismo, parental involvement, and academic performance in Caucasian and Hispanic adolescents. The researchers found that parental involvement was positively correlated to academic performance in both Hispanic and Caucasian students despite the barriers posed to Hispanic parents (i.e., cultural differences, language difficulties; Niemeyer et al., 2009). Parental involvement can be viewed as a protective factor that promotes academic success, and school counselors and educators must make every effort to reduce barriers that parents face in supporting the academic success of their children (Niemeyer et al., 2009).

Several investigators have documented that levels of parent involvement are related to socioeconomic status, beliefs about the role and place of parents in school, misunderstandings regarding school officials' expectations, and level of comfort with the English language (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; García-Coll et al., 2002; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lopez, 2001; Trueba, 1988). For example, García-Coll et al. (2002) found that comfort with the English language was positively associated with both home- and school-based involvement for three immigrant groups (Dominicans, Portuguese, and Cambodian). Parents' level of comfort with the English language might not only contribute to higher levels of parent involvement, but might also enhance students' academic adjustment.

Ramirez (2003) interviewed Latino immigrant parents regarding what they thought prevented them from being involved in schools. From this interview, three themes emerged; communication, expectations, and accountability. Most Latino parents felt that teachers did not communicate with them regarding their children's performance and grades at school, leading them to feel abandoned and helpless (Ramirez, 2003). Most of these immigrant parents believed that teachers did not care about their involvement and language was a main barrier in communicating with each other (Ramirez, 2003). The researchers suggested that different multicultural strategies are needed to enhance parental involvement in school settings (Ramirez, 2003).

Different reasons have been presented as to why parents may have difficulties getting involved in their children's education. Henderson, Marburger, and Ooms (1986) identified two kinds of barriers that parents often encounter; attitudinal and logistical. Logistical barriers refer to childcare, money, access to school functions, and time concerns. Attitudinal barriers refer to parents' uncertainty regarding their roles, feeling anxious as to how they are perceived by others, and communication problems that may also be viewed as disagreements in educational policies (Henderson et al., 1986). Recent immigrant parents face similar barriers in addition to a language barrier (Golan & Petersen, 2002).

Promoting Parental Involvement

School counselors can be instrumental in addressing many of these barriers either directly or indirectly through supportive/collaborative efforts. School counselors can advocate for Latino students by working to bridge cultural differences and misunderstandings between the school and Latino families. First and foremost, school counselors must ensure that school-wide efforts to eliminate the language barrier are implemented (Horowitz & Bronte-Tinkew, 2007). All written school-to-home communication should be printed in both English and Spanish. Face-to-face communications should also be facilitated with bi-lingual interpreters. Where bi-lingual faculty members are not available, schools can recruit the assistance of bi-lingual parents and/or members of the community to facilitate bi-lingual meetings and functions. Second, school counselors can provide in-service trainings or workshops to educate administrators and teachers about the potential barriers to Latino parents' involvement in their children's academic pursuits, and other important knowledge about Latino culture and values. This information can help educators reach out to Latino families in culturally sensitive ways that promote more effective school to home interactions. For example, understanding that warm, personalized styles of interaction are values held among many Hispanic/Latino individuals, educators might replace the typical written notice of parent-teacher conferences usually sent home with students with an initial personal contact to invite parents to a meeting (Golan & Petersen, 2002).

Third, school counselors can convey the expectation of parent involvement in school activities in a culturally responsive manner. Parents who understand the school's expectations and procedures are better prepared to provide congruent support for their children. School counselors can enhance Hispanic/Latino parents' understanding of the expectations the school has for their children by coordinating and providing parent groups and workshops. When planning meetings and workshops, counselors should make every effort to address the logistical barriers that parents may face (Golan & Petersen, 2002). For instance, soliciting input from parents about the times they are available and scheduling events accordingly can greatly increase participation. In addition, school counselors might forge connections with students in secondary schools to provide on-site oversight of young children during scheduled events. Golan and Petersen (2002) suggest that these forums can be used to address topics such as school policies and expectations, communicating with school staff, and using home as a place to learn. For instance, counselors can provide parents with specific ideas (e.g., establishing a routine schedule for homework, limiting the use of video games and television) they can implement to promote their children's academic performance. More specifically, teachers could provide a list of suggestions as to how parents might get involved with their child's school work. Some parents may be unsure as to how exactly they could get involved with their child's school work and a list of suggestions may help these parents feel less confused about their roles and increase their involvement. Some Hispanic/Latino parents may also need assistance with navigating the school system. Counselors can facilitate parents' access to the resources available to them by providing an up-to-date resource list of persons to contact at school for particular concerns (Golan & Petersen, 2002).

Fourth, providing workshops to enhance parents' personal and professional development is an additional way to help parents develop familiarity with the school and

faculty. For instance, counselors and/or teachers could lead training groups for parents to develop parenting skills, to learn English as a second language, or to learn about the community. Furthermore, school counselors can help form support groups for Latino parents to help them network with other parents in the school. These efforts can foster a sense of community among parents that may continue throughout their children's school years.

The impetus for the movement to increase teachers' cultural competencies is undoubtedly the rapid ethnic and racial diversification in the United States and the increasing disparity between the cultural backgrounds of teachers and students. Teachers are being implored to use instructional strategies that incorporate multicultural information and implement activities that promote cultural awareness during their instruction. The goal of these methodologies is to increase students' school belonging and promote positive student self-concepts. According to Gay (2000) culturally responsive teachers use cultural knowledge and prior experience in an effort to make learning more appropriate and legitimize the cultural heritage of all students. However, Gay and Kirkland (2003) illuminated that in order for teachers to truly become culturally responsive, they must first engage in self-reflection and acquire cultural critical consciousness.

Many scholars have noted that teachers may have had limited exposure to multicultural training or experiences designed to increase cultural responsiveness. Villegas and Lucas (2002) reported that educators have responded to the need for culturally competent teachers by simply adding a specialized course in the training for burgeoning teachers. Moreover, teachers who completed their training prior to the late 1990s likely received no specialized coursework regarding culturally responsive teaching. Villegas and Lucas noted that teachers would be better served if they were exposed to more comprehensive training and continuing education.

Enhancing Culturally Responsive Teaching

Assuming that school counselors have received multicultural training and have a developed sense of self-awareness, they can be influential and beneficial in helping teachers engage in the personal exploration that would increase their cultural awareness. School counselors may not provide teachers with actual culturally responsive teaching strategies, but they can help teachers develop the personal and professional conditions required to be able to implement these teaching practices. School counselors can provide in-service workshops and/or professional development activities to engage teachers in activities aimed at helping to increase their self-awareness and develop critical consciousness. For instance, counselors can assist teachers to explore and challenge stereotypic beliefs or prejudices they may have that might impact their work with Latino children. In addition, counselors can educate teachers regarding issues of power and inequity in society and encourage them to consider how these dynamics are played out within the school and their classrooms.

Some teachers will find this sort of introspection and reflection about issues pertaining to ethnicity rather uncomfortable, and as a result, appear hesitant or unwilling to engage in these discussions. For instance, Gay and Kirkland (2003) noted that some teachers in training will not want to engage in discussions regarding ethnicity, may not be

aware of educational inequities based on ethnicity, or may be deliberately opposed to learning about culturally diverse issues in education. If this is an issue, it is incumbent upon the school counselor to provide a forum where teachers could engage in these discussions without fear of persecution and allow for a frank evaluation of why these kinds of strategies need to be implemented. As teachers become more aware of themselves and the social realities of students from non-mainstream backgrounds, they will become more apt to understand and respond to the needs of students who are culturally different from them (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Counselors can also provide information regarding the home and community values of Latino students, in order to help teachers understand how these values could influence classroom learning. Although the term Latino is very much a pan ethnic label, and it includes various and distinctive nationalities, there are some values and cultural mores that are ubiquitous within this culture. For instance, there is a very concrete concept of family and it is quite possible that the entire family, as opposed to mother and father dyads, is rearing children. Consequently, it may be appropriate for teachers to reach out to more members of the family (e.g., grandparents, aunts and uncles) when making inquiries about academic performance and home life. It is imperative for counselors to help teachers recognize how cultural values of the home may be disparate from the ones displayed in the school environment.

Finally, school counselors can make themselves available to teachers for consultation to ensure that teachers feel supported in their efforts to employ culturally responsive teaching practices. Consultation sessions might be used to help teachers develop effective interventions to use when students engage in discriminatory behaviors in the classroom. Counselors can also assist teachers in the on-going evaluation of culturally responsive teaching. For instance, counselors can observe teachers' in the classroom and/or administer assessments that measure students' perceptions of teachers' culturally responsive teaching practices. Interpretation of these assessments can inform teachers of specific areas of strength and areas in need of development. Moreover, school-wide assessments can be used to evaluate the extent to which the school is providing culturally responsive education services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural proficiency is a multifaceted and laborious process that requires the cooperation of administrators, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel. The authors of this article argue that school counselors can provide the support, camaraderie, and intervention conducive to serving Latino students in an increasingly multicultural society. Moreover, in this article, we provide applicable and achievable techniques that would include parents and culturally responsive teachers in the endeavor to increase personal and academic success for Latino students. Although some of the suggestions provided may appear idealistic, they are intended as initial steps that can be taken to attain much needed gains in parent involvement and cultural responsiveness for Latino students.

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