

Proposal #: 61

Proposal Title: Leadership to Connect Home and School: Educator Perspectives on

Abstract

The study explores how educators construct meanings about and hold values pertaining to parent involvement and related issues relevant to English language learners. Description and analysis of parent involvement programs, communications, partnerships, and professional development utilized Heifetz's (1994) technical and adaptive model of leadership. An interpretation is offered of the technical and adaptive approaches to leadership and parent involvement as connected to issues of quality schooling. In particular attention is given to the counter-intuitiveness of adaptive work and exposes contradictions of reliance on technical work for building home-school connections to support academic success for English language learners.

Proposal

Educational literature strongly advocates increased parental involvement in schools for children in general but for English language learners in particular (Chavkin, 1993; Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Deslandes, Royer, & Turcotte, 1997; Epstein, 1986, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Burrow, 1995; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Moles, 1993; Peterson, 1989; Simich-Dudgeon, 1986). Strategies for overcoming obstacles and breaking down barriers between home and school for parent involvement are clearly identified and outlined. However, given the consistency and urgency of the call for increased involvement, it would appear to be one where action and transformation necessary for achieving desired outcomes is slow. Sluggish progress in the area of increased involvement of parents of English language learners is particularly troubling given current school practices, which appear to place a sizable and growing segment of the student body at risk (Chavkin, 1991; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Moles, 1993; Simich-Dudgeon, 1993).

The current literature generally suggests tolerance and acceptance of diversity on the part of educators, as well as increased attention and effort at modifying school practices to include all parents. Research on parent involvement of immigrant, Hispanic, and/or English language learners has carefully delineated cultural and community values of these families and has provided educators with alternative interpretations to explain observable patterns of parental involvement in schools. The literature provides much less attention to how educators construct meanings about and hold values pertaining to learning, school, language, parent involvement, and related issues relevant to English language learners. The present study sought to address such deficiency through examining the perspectives of educators in six school districts with a substantial or growing number of English language learners to address the following questions: (a) How do educational personnel view parental involvement in general and parental involvement of English language learners specifically? (b) What are the similarities and differences in these perspectives of districts whose English language learners are performing successfully on accountability measures and those whose students are not successful in meeting state accountability standards? and (c) What are the implications of answers to such questions for educators who seek to identify, interpret, and institute change in their educational practice in ways that promise improvement in schooling for all children? By exploring the meanings and views of parental involvement as described by central office personnel, building administrators, and classroom teachers in these districts, this study examines programmatic designs and educator values as a means for understanding leadership that connects home and school for English language learners.

The research for this study was conducted in six school districts in the Northeast Texas region. Each district was selected to participate in the project based on predetermined criteria, which included location, size, demographic composition, degree of parental involvement, and student achievement as measured by scores for Hispanic reading on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The selection of districts used Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data for the 2001–2002 school years. Multi-year data was collected from the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) and analyzed in order to provide the historical perspective for each district included in the study.

The data collected for the study involved interviews and observations with educators in the six districts;

however, other methods and approaches were used such as photographs, collection of archived data, and gathering of artifacts in conjunction with fieldwork as ways of developing trustworthiness in the research study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Glesne, 1999; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Face-to-face interviews using semi-structured interview protocols were conducted with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, district program coordinator or director for Bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL), campus administrators, classroom teachers (i.e., both from general education classes as well as Bilingual and/or ESL classes), librarians, nurses, community liaisons, adult non-educator members of school and district site-based committees, Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) members, and school secretaries of each of the districts. Audio recordings were used, with prior consent from informants. Tapes were transcribed verbatim. Field notes taken during the interviews were also transcribed.

Educators in the interviews readily declared that too many parents did not work with children at home in ways that supported learning at school. However, teachers and administrators could not say how they knew this to be true other than to point to low academic performance and parent communications. Failure to complete homework or to return reading materials once complete were also identified by participants as validation of lack of parent support. In response to such perspective, district personnel described their efforts of developing programs and activities to encourage family participation and strengthen collaboration between educators and parents. Given the score of such programs, several of the districts employed professional educators for the purpose of coordinating parent involvement. Educators also described numerous endeavors to facilitate home-school communications, school and community partnerships, and professional development as components of creating the kind of parent involvement necessary to address student need and educator challenges. Each of these endeavors and the ways they connect to educator perceptions will be described in greater detail in the paper.

Through categorization of programs, communication, partnerships, and professional development similarities and differences in the perspectives of educators in the districts whose English language learners were performing successfully on accountability measures compared to those whose students were not as successful in meeting state accountability standards were identified. Similarities between the two groups of districts were examined and labeled as technical solutions while the differences were viewed as incorporating an adaptive approach to parent involvement. Heifetz's (1994) theory of leadership was turned to as a framework for analyzing the data given his articulated concepts of technical and adaptive work.

Educators were found to engage in technical work when they defined: (a) the process, issue and/or goal as simple; (b) time was limited and/or money was needed for carrying out educational functions; (c) teacher, parent, and/or student change was limited in scope and was known; (d) control of information was desired; and (e) motivation of participants was extrinsic and/or rational procedures could be used to attain desired goals. The adaptive approach to parent involvement rested on a different set of assumptions. Table 1 succinctly summarizes the components and attributes of the technical and adaptive approaches to parent involvement found in the study.

Table 1.
Components and Attributes of Technical and Adaptive Work for Parent Involvement

Technical/Adaptive
 Difficulty Simple/Complex
 Resources Generates/Consumes
 Development Static/Dynamic
 Power Closed/Open
 Foundations Rational/Non-Rational

A technical approach was found to dominate the discourse of participants from both high and low performing districts. In other words, educators described through their responses the perspective that problems of student need and teacher challenges were clearly known and defined. The solution was unambiguous: develop and offer programs to address and increase parent involvement. Thus, much that

participants described as parent programs, home-school communications, school and community partnerships, and professional development proceeded on assumptions about educator knowledge and relied on educator authority. However, in many respects the technical work conducted in these schools, which was described as an effort to increase and improve parent involvement, was found to define and limited that involvement. Indeed, seeking parent involvement, the technical approach was purposefully confining in the way it directed and even substituted participation.

I think we've almost got ourselves to the point where we can almost do without [parent involvement] because we have so many that don't give it to us so we've found ways to help those kids without the parent's support. (Elementary Principal, Monticello)

Adaptive work, on the other hand, presented educators with multiple challenges. It operated on its own frame of time, which in some cases was much longer than the end-of-year accountability assessments. It rested on the values of parents and educators and gave voice to such values. Conflict was therefore evident; it was not avoided. Adaptive work was described as messy; with unknown consequences for all involved. With no guarantee of resolution to identified issues it challenged these already over-worked and under-appreciated educators.

This analysis should not be seen or viewed as suggesting an absence of adaptive work for parent involvement by educators in districts whose English language learners were performing less successfully on state accountability measures than those whose students were performing at high levels. Rather, the difference between the two is more appropriately expressed as experiential and holistic. In other words, it was the way participants spoke in the interview that was later analyzed as part of an adaptive approach to parent involvement as opposed to reliance on technical solutions. Educators in the high performing districts used language that exposed adaptive work as being intentional and integrated.

The paper presents description and analysis of the above analyzed perspectives shared by participants to expose technical work being performed through parent involvement programs, communications, partnerships, and professional development. The paper also offers description and analysis of the adaptive approach to parent involvement. The paper concludes with an interpretation of the technical and adaptive approach to parent involvement as connected to issues of quality schooling. In particular attention is given to the counter-intuitiveness of adaptive work and exposes contradictions of reliance on technical work alone for building home-school connections to support academic success for English language learners.

References included in original proposal.