

Helping All Families Participate in School Life

Yoo-Seon Bang

"I don't know much about the American education system or my child's experiences at school. So, I visited the school to see what's going on, but the door was locked and I had to speak through the intercom in English. They didn't allow me to come in because I couldn't explain what I wanted."

"When a problem occurs with a child in school, American mothers can visit and talk to the teacher to solve it. But in my case, when my son faced problems, I couldn't do anything for him."

THESE ARE THE VOICES OF TWO KOREAN IMMIGRANT MOTHERS of kindergartners, struggling to participate in their children's education in "American" schools. Family involvement is an essential factor in U.S. schools, especially in the education of young children. The parents' role is critical in early childhood education, because moving from home to school is a major transition for children and families (McBride, Bae, & Hicks 1999; Copple & Bredekamp 2009). Research supports the benefits of family involvement for children's

future academic achievement (Faires, Nichols, & Rickelman 2000; Jeynes 2003), attendance rate, self-esteem, and school behavior (Fantuzzo, McWayne, & Perry 2004). Programs for quality improvement, such as NAEYC Accreditation of Programs for Young Children, include family involvement as an essential component of children's education (NAEYC 2008).

Despite growing awareness of the importance of parent participation and its clearly documented educational benefits, many schools still do not effectively welcome culturally and linguistically diverse families (Mayes 2002; Lee 2005). A lack of understanding by some schools and teachers about these families' unique needs has often hindered their participation (see Kirmani 2007).

My experiences as a researcher, working with immigrant families and families temporarily relocating to the United States, and my own struggles as a Korean parent of a child in a U.S. public school have helped me understand the needs of cultural and linguistic minority families. The following suggestions may guide educators in understanding and supporting the involvement of these families in their children's schools.

1. Be aware that culturally and linguistically diverse families who are new to the country may not understand the U.S. school system.

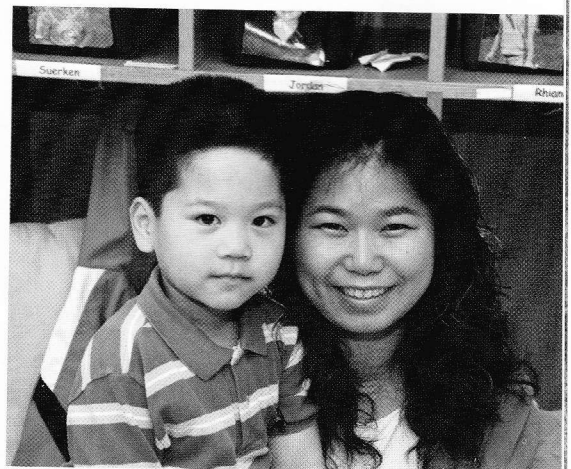
Conventional parent involvement programs like Back-to-School Night and fund-raising book fairs are familiar events to many U.S. parents. However, such programs are foreign concepts to some minority families. For example,

one Korean immigrant mother in my research struggled to figure out what a Box Top for Education was when the school asked families to send them in for fund-raising. She finally sent in shoe box lids with her child. In another case, an Indian mother hurried to school with shopping money for her kindergartner after receiving a call from the school during the annual Holiday Gift Shopping Event. The event is a time when children can shop for holiday gifts for their families in a school store run by parent volunteers. In reading the sheet that came home earlier with her son, she misunderstood the request and sent in the family's wish list without money to purchase gifts.

Examples like these show how a lack of knowledge about common school activities and traditions can cause families stress and embarrassment and ultimately limit their involvement. Insufficient information explaining family involvement activities often discourages cultural minority families' participation by confusing them about

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school or teacher expectations. Teachers need to understand that families from distant homelands may not have the same familiarity with school routines and events as other families. School staff need to provide clear, complete, and concrete information about what they expect from parents—in the families' home languages, whenever possible—so that families with limited background knowledge can easily participate.

2. Provide systematic means for communication.

Many linguistically and culturally diverse families and families from other countries may be quiet, thus appearing satisfied with everything that goes on in school. Because these families do not directly voice their questions or worries about their children and school, teachers may believe they do not have concerns about the school or teachers or feel dissatisfaction. However, lack of communication does not mean that families are content; rather, they may choose not to express their frustrations and instead hold them back because they believe that complaints could negatively influence their child's relationship with the teacher.

For example, in one study (Crozier 1999), Pakistani parents were reported as rarely questioning their children's school directly or raising concerns with the teachers. In my own study (Bang 2009), one Korean parent mentioned that when a Korean family is dissatisfied with a school, they would rather move to another town to seek a school with a better fit for their child than voice their concerns to school staff.

Thus, to better address families' concerns and develop more effective educational environments for children



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of diverse backgrounds or nationalities, it is essential to provide appropriate communication tools for families to express their concern without fear or discomfort. A suggestion box or an anonymous survey asking for parent feedback are two possibilities.

3. Emphasize the importance of both parents' roles in education.

Many cultures have different expectations for gender roles in terms of parents' involvement in and responsibility for their children's schooling. For example, in Asian countries, such as Korea, Japan, and India, children's education is considered mainly the mother's concern, while the father's responsibility is the family's economic stability. As a result, participation in school-related events falls disproportionately to the mother.

Such traditional cultural attitudes continue to influence Asian immigrant fathers' school involvement. According to one Korean father, he has the time and interest in activities such as

Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings and other school events, but says it is not his place to participate—he feels “awkward and embarrassed” at the idea. School staff should be aware of such discomfort and encourage both parents to participate in their children's education.

4. Offer parent ESL programs. Lack of proficiency in English is the most serious barrier to many families' participation in schools. Their frustration with and lack of confidence in their English skills directly influence their children's education by limiting home-school communication (Lee 2005). However, despite families' need and eagerness to learn the language, many of the families I have worked with expressed difficulty

in finding programs to learn practical English. They were often disappointed by local English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, which mostly focus on academic knowledge. Schools themselves can provide parent ESL programs or English conversation support groups to teach practical school-related English, such as questions to ask at parent-teacher conferences and vocabulary and terms used in PTO meetings, so families can participate with more confidence.

5. Present seminars explaining the school system. Many minority families who have just moved to the United States are confused about the school system. They struggle to understand how the system operates and how the classroom functions. For example, a Chinese father punished his daughter who received *S* for *satisfactory*, because he understood the grading system to begin with *A* and progress downward (Wanning & Lee 2001).

In my research, Ecuadorian parents expressed their lack of knowledge about the special services or resources available to them in the school. Particularly when facing situations like receiving from the school a warning letter, immigrant families are frustrated because they do not know how to contact the school staff with whom they should speak or even who that staff may be. Schools can provide basic seminars—with clear handouts—about procedures, curriculum, classroom management, and school policies, such those concerning visitors, student behavior, and student absences. Such seminars help all families participate in their children's education without the struggles and anxiety that can result from ignorance of the system. Conducting seminars in families' home languages is the most effective approach.

Conclusion

Teachers and administrators must understand what culturally and linguistically diverse families need in order to work with staff to provide the best possible educational environment for their children. By developing systematic support, schools welcome culturally and linguistically diverse families and help them become effective educational partners. Through awareness and effort, educators can better prepare staff, classrooms, and schools to teach all children and welcome and include their families in our pluralistic society.

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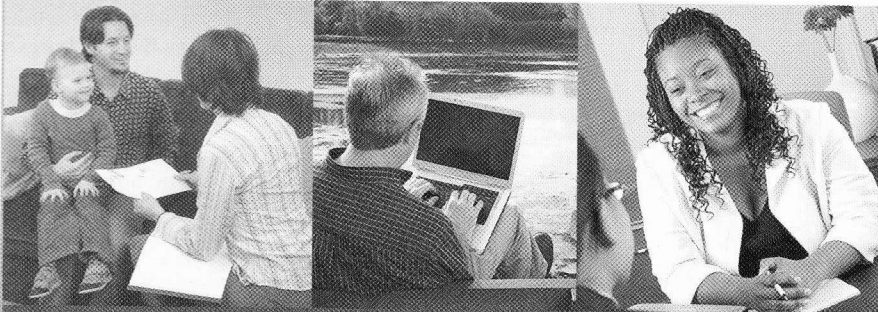
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