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A Different Approach To Family Involvement

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by Leslie Patterson, Shelia Baldwin, Rubén Gonzales, Irma Guadarrama, and Liz Keith

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The Houston Chronicle recently quoted a school counselor who blamed low student achievement on parents, whom he called "a bunch of seventh-grade dropouts who can't add 2 plus 2" (Houston Chronicle, 1998, p. 21A). As educators, we see too many of our colleagues play that blame game as we try to respond to increasing public pressure to make schools "work." The logic goes something like this: "We are doing everything we know how, and these children still are not succeeding. If only their parents would (fill in the blank), everything would be just fine."

That is, in fact, a seductive argument. Student populations in our schools are changing dramatically. Families that were formerly "minority" are now the majority; poverty is a lived reality; and English is but one of many languages spoken in students' homes. In communities like these, our ignorance of students' complex lives is a major barrier to student learning (Au, 1998; Delpit, 1995, Sleeter & Grant, 1999).

This article is about how a group of teachers and teacher educators tried to address this issue with families who had recently immigrated to our city from other countries. We knew we didn't understand these families very well, and we wanted to know what they could teach us about what their children might need at school. Using the Moll and Gonzales Funds of Knowledge project as a model (1992, 1993), we developed and documented a process we came to call collaborative family inquiry.

Like Moll and Gonzales, we used home visits, ethnographic interviews, and collaborative reflection in an effort to make our teaching more culturally responsive, more connected to the children's lived realities (Guadarrama, 1997; Patterson, 1997). Moll and his colleagues claim that "by capitalizing on household and other community resources," or funds of knowledge, in children's homes and communities, they could organize instruction in much more engaging and authentic ways than "the role-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992, p. 131). They define "funds of knowledge" as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being (p. 133).

Here, we discuss the written reflections by three of the teacher participants in our adaptation of this work. Rubén, Liz and Shelia visited students' homes, documented their observations and continued to reflect on the long-term influence of this project two years following the first home visits. The primary data sources for this discussion were reflections written by these three teachers in May, 1997, at the end of the first year of the project, and in November, 1998.

The Houston Funds of Knowledge Project

In 1996-1997, our research group included four university teacher educators and eight classroom teachers. Our objective was for each teacher to use ethnographic observations and interviews to learn more about one student's home and family, with the goal of integrating this knowledge into our teaching. Each teacher made at least three visits to the home of a student whose family had recently immigrated to the Houston area. The home visits were documented in field notes, and most of the parent interviews were audiotaped. The research group met to debrief one Saturday morning each month from November, 1996, through April, 1997.

At first, we talked about how to begin, how to record data and reflections, and how to make sense of what we were learning. But as the year went on, most of our conversations were not about the technical aspects of data gathering and analysis. Instead, we talked about the teachers' growing friendships with the families.

At the end of the year, nine of us wrote articles. Irma, who had initiated the project, edited and compiled the articles into a publication which we have since shared with a range of audiences (Guadarrama, 1997). During 1997-98, three of the original group (Rubén, Liz, and Shelia) and two new teachers continued visiting homes of other children and met informally. This discussion is based on Rubén's, Liz's and Shelia's reflections.

As an elementary teacher, Rubén's focus was on discovering and building community with his students and their families. He shared common cultural experiences with the family, and his reflections focused on his renewed awareness of those commonalities, the importance of family story and collaborative problem-solving.

As a beginning middle school teacher, Liz's reflections focused on personalizing her instruction and research. Her initial concerns were instructional, related to student motivation and classroom management. Her home visits convinced her to build on what students know rather than to move through the prescribed curriculum without regard for students' backgrounds. The second year, she organized and continues to lead a collaborative family inquiry group with colleagues.

As a high school teacher, Shelia, who had many years of teaching experience and a solid understanding of multicultural education and critical pedagogy, found that even she had to confront some surprising preconceptions and, through this process, was prompted to become an advocate for these students at her school in ways she had never before dared.

Rubén's Reflections: Discovering and Building Community

Rubén grew up in a small Texas town until the age of 16 when he entered seminary. He graduated from a Jesuit college, left the seminary and moved to Houston in 1983. In 1990, he began teaching in an elementary school where 95 percent of the students are Hispanic and 94 percent are in the federal lunch program. The administration and faculty of this school use a wide range of programs to meet student needs. There are many parent services, after-school activities, and volunteer opportunities for parents. Rubén chose to visit a family he already knew rather

well. He had previously taught other children from the family, and both the mother and grandmother were active in school activities.

Rubén writes that his "theory and practice lie with a saying from the artist Amado Peña: "*Para los niños la semilla de nuestro futuro*," or "For the children, the seed of our future." Ruben continues, "Everything centers around this idea (that) we need to take care of our children. That is why the Funds of Knowledge project has been a dear part of my life. . . it speaks of our children and families" (November, 1998).

Rubén writes in great detail about the family's history and about their involvement in school activities. He also writes about problem-solving with the mother and about his work as a Scout leader and his intervention in a confrontation between the father and another Scout leader.

Respecting the Family Members

Rubén's written reflections repeatedly emphasize his increasing understanding of the family's life and his growing respect for all the adults in the family:

This is the third year in a row that I have the opportunity to work with the Lopez family. . . I found while working with them that education plays an important part of their lives, (that) providing a nurturing environment for Juan and Lisa (the children) is very important, and (that) they certainly show a spirit of adventure, moving from El Salvador to the United States and setting up a business. . . (May, 1997)

Using the Power of Family Stories

Rubén writes first of his own family stories and then of the stories he heard from the Lopez family. Rubén began integrating these family stories into his teaching plans:

. . .the students will have an opportunity to hear stories *from los abuelos, tias, and tios*. I hope to get a couple of guest speakers who will talk about *aquellos tiempos*. . . I hope to put together a culminating activity that will probably be a potluck dinner for parents, students, and family members. (November, 1998)

Collaborating with Parents to Help Children

Rubén also writes about several incidents showing his attempts to collaborate with the parents:

I talked to Rachel, Juan's mother, every morning about his progress or conduct, because she and Rosa, her mother, would be at school for breakfast everyday. Juan is an excellent student and is a leader in his own way. . .Juan was having problems with his conduct in the classroom, so we were working together to solve the problem. (May, 1997)

Lisa was in my second grade class last year and is looping with me in third grade. She can be quite a challenge in her conduct in the classroom. She is constantly getting into trouble. . .She is

struggling academically at this time. I have talked to Rachel (the mother) about the problem, but it still has not resolved itself. . .(November, 1998)

Building Social Networks of Influence

Rubén's writing also includes his realizations about the interdependent social networks of family, neighborhood, and school:

One of the things I notice (in the 1997 reflections) is that it was very important for me to explain my own Funds of Knowledge, so that I could further analyze the Lopez family Funds of Knowledge. It got me in touch (with the connections among) all our lives and the roles that we play in society. Many times, we are so caught up in the daily routines of our personal lives that we don't stop to analyze what we are doing (and see that it) is of importance. It is going to impact the lives of those around us, which will then influence those around them. . . (November, 1998)

Liz's Reflections: Personalizing Instruction and Research

When the project began, Liz had taught English in an inner city middle school for one year on an emergency certificate and was taking a language arts methods courses for teacher certification and for her Master's program. Liz had grown up in the neighborhood where she taught and still lived there. Although her family was not Latino, she spoke some Spanish and felt comfortable making conversation with the parents of her students. It was clear from her early comments, however, that she was still struggling to become comfortable as a novice teacher. She talked about the students' lack of motivation and about her need to gain more control over classroom behavior.

At first, Liz chose a girl whose family had moved back and forth from Mexico to Houston several times. Her rationale for selecting this girl was to learn more about the family support of a successful student. The second year, Liz not only chose a student to visit, but she also invited colleagues on her campus to join a Funds of Knowledge inquiry group. She met regularly with these teachers to discuss what they were learning from their home visits.

Building on What Students Know

Liz's reflections clearly demonstrate that this project taught her that her students' life experiences had to be the basis for their school learning:

I see curriculum requirements through new eyes. . . In my reading classroom this year, there are a couple of things I am doing that I can trace to FOK (the Funds of Knowledge project). One is giving students choices of reading material on a regular basis. My FOK experience has made me more aware of my students as individuals, and this is a way I can encourage their individual interests academically. Additionally, I am choosing literature for my classes that I think will appeal to them. I feel better equipped to judge what may appeal to them because of FOK. (November, 1998)

Making Friends with the Families

Liz emphasizes the power of these growing personal relationships with the families of the students she visited:

. . . I have found that it is difficult to think of these home visits as "home visits" and our conversations as "research." It feels odd to use these words to refer to the friendship that has developed between my student's mother and me. I never expected to find a friend in my research, but that's what happened. (November, 1998)

Personalizing the Teacher/Student Relationship

This project also has influenced Liz's stance as a teacher and her relationship with her students:

Before, I was an outsider; I kept a certain distance between myself and my students by choice--- Me and Them. Although I was thoughtful and creative in my teaching, my own goals and concerns were my highest priority. Now, I think that we are all in this together. Somewhere along the way I began developing a more personal relationship with all my students. I think it's because I talk to them. We chat. They care to tell me when a grandmother dies or invite me to a *quincién*. They ask me what I did on the weekend, and I tell them. I am more responsive to my students in general. *What* I teach has not really changed so much as *how* I teach. My students have priority in my mind over my curriculum. (November, 1998)

Foregrounding Friendship; Backgrounding Research

Finally, Liz rejects the trappings of the anthropologist and field researcher. She finds that she learns more when she approaches the family as an interested person, a potential friend:

One thing I am doing differently in this project is that I have abandoned the accoutrement of the researcher in making home visits. In my continuing experience, I have found that the tape recorder, notebook, and pen are barriers to communication. They seem to intimidate the families I have visited. They highlight the differences between us and create tension, which seems at odds with the purpose and goals of this kind of research. (November, 1998)

Shelia's Reflections: Becoming a Student Advocate

Shelia, a veteran reading and ESL teacher with experience as a social worker, taught in a suburban high school with over 3000 students, grades nine through twelve. The student demographics at this school are rapidly shifting, with many recent immigrants, most from Mexico. The administration, faculty, and staff are struggling with their lack of experience and knowledge about how to respond to these students' needs.

Shelia joined this project as she was finishing a doctorate in multicultural education. Her dissertation had been teacher research, a study of a cultural studies class. Shelia claims, however, that, despite her background, this experience triggered powerful learning for her. She says that her intellectual understanding of immigrants and institutional discrimination became more personal and more authentic as she came to know this family as friends.

Confronting Faulty Assumptions about Immigrant Families

. . . When Mrs. García (the mother) arrived here she was leaving behind her husband, Mr. García, of twenty-plus years, her home, the family photography business, friends, and security, Carolina (the daughter, Shelia's student) told me during conversation we had together the last day of school, 'It has been hard to be separated. We have never been apart before.' . . . (May, 1997)

Although Mrs. García (the mother) does not have formal schooling nor a speaking knowledge of English, she is intelligent, industrious, and independent. Hardly fits the stereotype we in this country have applied to Mexican immigrants- especially women. . Some don't want to live here. They love their culture, lifestyle in their home communities. We think our way of life is superior and the envy of all the world- not necessarily so. An assumption that needs to be dispelled. (November, 1998)

Finding Opportunities for Advocacy and Social Action

Shelia's reflections demonstrate that she was taking a much more active role as advocate for her students:

My involvement with the García family has had a profound effect on me. . .it has made me more proactive, meaning more of a voice for our ESL students. I have learned that we need to actively campaign for our students. . . (May, 1997)

The prejudice (among faculty at our school) is overt. . . We don't know them as people like us. As was stated by another student, Roberto, when talking to him about having a cultural awareness day for our faculty and staff, he said, 'Then, maybe they will see us as good people.' (November, 1998)

Students as Ethnographers

In her reflections, Shelia talks about how she began seeing opportunities for her students to use ethnographic tools:

As I learned from the Garcías about the differences in the cultures within the states of Mexico, I decided on using an inquiry approach to studying the cultures. . .students would tap primary sources such as interviews with people of that culture, observations of events, everyday life, use of video/audiotaping, and photography. (May, 1997)

Building Personal Relationships

Shelia also writes about her emotional involvement with this family:

I think the most important thing I learned from this experience is getting to know our parents- not on school turf but on their home turf- in their communities. Experience their lives in their context- even for a brief moment. They may have little, but they share whatever they have and

with sincerity. They make time for us. It will open our eyes and our hearts. I have to stop now- I'll have red eyes and nose from crying and I have a class to teach. (November, 1998)

Claiming Ignorance and Making New Friends

This project has convinced us that, when teachers invite families to talk about their lived realities, everyone benefits. Teachers' transformations are complex and unique, however, because of their differing personal and professional histories, campus contexts, and individual concerns. Beyond those differences, however, we see two interrelated transformations common to all the participants in this project. First, the teachers abandoned their expert stance and claimed ignorance about the family's lived reality. The family taught; the teacher learned. Second, the teachers made friends with the parents. Without exception, these three teachers and the others in our project report that emerging friendships with the parents transformed their work- not just their work with that family but with all their students' families. Both these insights challenge the imbalance of power typical of teacher-parent relationships. These two transformations happen together, each feeding the other in dynamic and recursive ways.

We are convinced that collaborative family inquiry is a promising tool to help teachers meet the needs of evolving student populations. It provides authentic experiences through which we can learn first-hand about students' families and challenge the "dysconscious" (Ladson-Billings, 1994) racism embedded in our institutional policies and instructional practices. Collaborative family inquiry also closes the well-documented chasm between school knowledge and students' personal knowledge, which Sleeter and Grant (1999) predict will become even more pronounced as current demographic trends continue. Collaborative family inquiry also encourages teachers to invite students to become ethnographers, which becomes one way to "ground learning in situated life. . . (to) release the young to tell their stories, to 'name' the world they hope to transform" (Greene, 1995, p. 308). Collaborative family inquiry also changes parents' roles from passive "information receivers and spectators at school events" (Sleeter & Grant, 1999, p.173) to partners in school decision-making (Giroux, 1995). Finally, collaborative family inquiry requires teachers to be "engaged and transformative intellectuals who combine vision, conception, and practice" (Giroux, 1995, p. 302). This approach, grounded in the rich traditions of reflective inquiry and teacher research, challenges ongoing attempts by politicians, administrators and publishers to de-professionalize teachers.

We have introduced this approach to principals and teachers as a way to develop more culturally responsive literacy instruction. Frankly, only a few have accepted the invitation. They tend to cite one of three major barriers. One barrier is high stakes testing. Under that pressure, administrators find it difficult to make time for anything not directly related to test preparation. A second barrier is a general reluctance to go outside the school. People hesitate because they assume parent disinterest or hostility and because they fear crime in students' neighborhoods. Finally, the barrier most often mentioned is the lack of time. All these barriers are real, but not insurmountable. Rubén, Liz and Shelia- even three years after their first home visits- are continuing this work in some way. Rubén has recently become a principal and is beginning a Funds of Knowledge project as a centerpiece in the professional development work on his campus. Liz has analyzed two years of data about the Funds of Knowledge teacher study group she organized on her campus and is writing her master's thesis. Shelia has moved into a teacher

education program and is working with colleagues to set up community-based internships for preservice teachers, using insights from this project.

The benefits far exceed both the risks and the effort. Through collaborative family inquiry, we have found one way to begin to confront our arrogance and our ignorance -- to transform our teaching by making friends with our students' families.

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