Building Partnerships to Ensure Opportunity for All Students

Kelley Nobles

Michigan State University

Greeley School is an elementary school that services children in grades kindergarten through eight. The school is located in a Chicago neighborhood on the near north side, but because it is a magnet school, children are bussed in from all around the city. The student population is very diverse, but consists mostly of African and African American, Hispanic, Polish and Russian children. The school runs three separate tracks, including the bilingual program (which is mainly the African and Hispanic students), the gifted program (which is mainly the Russian, Polish and some Hispanic students), and the monolingual group (which is mainly the African American students and any Hispanic students who do not speak Spanish fluently at home). The range in socioeconomic status is quite drastic as well. Overall, the school is about eighty-six percent free or reduced lunch, but students' families range from upper middle class to poor.

This year, for the first time, two of the tracks merged in the second grade. Students from the bilingual program and monolingual program were put into one large classroom. The blend of cultures that have been historically separated at the school was at the same time intriguing and challenging for both teachers and students. As a result, it has become extremely apparent that there is an increasingly strong need for the school to connect to diverse families in order to improve the educational outcome for all students. Further, the school must reach out to form partnerships with families and the community to ensure that each student is given an equal opportunity for optimal education.

First, it is important to look at the different groups of students and families to understand their method of raising their children. Annette Laureau discusses the

different ways that child raising looks in different families. Her work stresses the power of social class and how its "dynamics are woven into the texture and rhythm of children and parents' daily lives" (236). A family's social class position directly affects vital aspects of a child's life, including how they spend their time, the language they use and develop at home, and how close they are with their extended family. One major difference that Lareau found among the families she studied was that middle class families practiced "concerted cultivation", whereas working class or poor families focused on "natural growth". Middle class parents tend to have their children involved in many organized activities where they often interact with adults. Working class children tend to have a lot more leisure time where they can spend time playing with cousins or visiting with other relatives. These children have more choice over how they spend their leisure time, and this freedom allows them to live a more "childlike" life in comparison to middle class children.

Lareau does continue to point out the advantages that middle class children do have over working class children. For example, she highlights the fact that middle class children have a larger vocabulary and are more comfortable talking to adults, or those in power. This, she points out, will positively affect the child's success in the workplace during adulthood. However, Lareau is careful to not paint one type of child raising as "better" than the other. She simply states that there does seem to be a more dominant idea of how children should be raised in America, and middle class families seem to be adhering to this idea. Working class and poor families have a different set of priorities (providing food and shelter takes precedence), and they therefore view their child's ability to maintain a happy childhood and reach natural

growth as a huge accomplishment.

Most importantly, Lareau's work points out that working class families are no less motivated to see their children be successful in school, but that they have a different approach. Often times, teachers and school administrators seem to wish that working class families were as "involved" as middle class families, and can even put a great deal of blame on working class parents when students are not successful. However, Lareau's work suggests that it is more effective and productive for teachers to consider where all families are coming from, and instead of passing judgment on a family for their level of involvement at school, try to understand where they are coming from.

Lareau's work suggests that all families are different, and that educators should take this into consideration when attempting to analyze their level of involvement. Gerardo Lopez, Jay Scribner and Kanya Mahitivanichcha, on the other hand, describe the necessity for a redefinition of what parental involvement actually is. First, their article titled *Redefining Parental Involvement: Lessons from High Performing Migrant-Impacted Schools* highlights the importance of parent involvement, indicating that "parental involvement not only students' academic achievement, but it is also a strong indicator of student success" (255). They suggest that schools work to create a welcoming environment that encourages parent involvement by building on the cultural values of families. Before beginning to create this type of environment, though, schools must first recognize that there is a strong difference between how teachers and parents view involvement.

Typically, schools perceive parent involvement as families coming to the

school to participate in formal school wide events. This often means that schools are providing parents with guidelines for how to be involved with their student while they are at home as well. Parents perceive involvement much differently, seeing their role as one that provides nurturing, instills values, and prepares their student to do their best when they are at school. The difference in perception may lead to teachers assuming that parents are unable to provide the learning environment that is expected by the school given the guidelines, as well as lead to parents feeling defensive about their level of involvement with their student. Rather than focusing on the more formal or "mainstream" ways of measuring parent involvement, Lopez et al. suggests that new programs be built to "bridge the gap between formal and informal parental involvement activities" (257). While doing so, though, schools must remember that it is crucial to build on each family's beliefs, values, and culture.

As in many schools, there are certain parents and families that are seen frequently at Greeley School. These parents feel connected to the school, the teachers and the administration. However, it is important to reflect on why these particular parents frequent the building and feel a strong connection when many families do not. When volunteers are needed for school events or tasks it is often the parents of middle class families that are asked to help out. These parents tend to have one family member that stays at home to raise the children, whereas all adults in the lower-middle class and poor families must work in order to provide. The middle class families at Greely also tend to live nearby with easy access to means to getting to the school. At this time, not enough effort is made to connect to families with multiple working parents that may not be able to physically come into the

school often due to work schedules or the distance between their home and the school itself. All families must feel a connection to the school, no matter their social class or situation.

Educators must also take a closer look at the individual student. Herbert Kohl's book *I Won't Learn From You and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* suggests that developing a deep understanding of each student, their needs and concerns, as well as their motives and personal barriers is the only way to reach all students. Kohl states that the job of an educator is not just to teach a set curriculum or prepare students for standardized tests. Instead, it is an educator's responsibility to provide students with "opportunities to have encounters with learning that might transform their lives" (64). Further, Kohl challenges educators to create opportunities and challenges that allow students to listen to their "inner voices" and realize that they have the freedom to "reject what other people want them to learn" if it "erodes their confidence, dignity, and self-respect" (64). Kohl is urging educators and administrators to connect with students on a deeper level, and through that connection, to inspire all students to learn as individuals. In other words, if educators guide their students to see that they have the freedom, on their own, to learn or "not learn", then they are providing all students with the opportunity to have the educational experience that best suits them.

Districts everywhere are promoting a heavy focus on standardized tests as a way to assess student growth and teacher success. In an effort to increase test scores and keep up with the increasing amount of high-stakes assessments, Greeley School has incorporated several set curriculums that teachers are expected to follow

at the same rate and depth as their colleagues. To some, it may appear that providing each child with the same exact lesson on the same exact day is providing them with equal educational opportunity. However, as both Lareau and Kohl suggest, each child's background is different and educators must seek to connect with each child individually to understand their educational needs. It is when educators are reaching each child at their level that they are truly providing an optimal educational experience for all.

Next, in order to evaluate the success of a school's connection to all of its stakeholders, it is important to look at the school's leadership. Carlos McCray and Floyd Beachum's text *School Leadership in a Diverse Society* analyzes school leadership in the past and present. The text touches on several vital aspects of multicultural education, but each aspect is tied together through the critical lens of bias and racism. McCray and Beachum highlight the inequality between CLD learners and their "White counterparts". They state that in the most recent reports, "African American students and other CLD learners are falling further behind" (3). They also suggest that although it is understood that in an age of accountability students' scores on a standardized test often measure success, it is more important to view success as "students being exposed to a holistic educational experience, which entails students' educative process going beyond literacy and numeracy" (4). With this, the question of how a school's leader can create this type of learning experience for all students while still maintaining a "competitive edge" (or in other words, still preparing students for the non-optional standardized testing) arises.

The key to doing so, according to McCray and Beachum, is to focus on the "educational relationship and pact between the student and teacher". They point out that it is extremely important for teachers and school leaders to respect and understand students' cultures and communities, and show authentic interest in their students' lives. These school leaders are much more successful than those who do not form this genuine connection.

Additionally, school leaders must be aware of both "cultural collision" and "cultural collusion" and how these mindsets hinder the connection between school leaders and students. Cultural collision, or the "clash in beliefs, cultures, or values" can be harmful. When a teacher or student feels that clash, the connection between that student and the teacher (and the school community itself) is weakened. Likewise, cultural collusion, or a teacher or leader's tendency to "collude in an implicit educational agreement that dooms the student" (101) breaks the student's connection and can lead to a negative educational experience.

A lot of work has been done at Greeley School to help guide teachers and school leaders to be more culturally responsive. Teachers have been given strategies to use in the classroom to promote a rich appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism. During the professional development experiences related to cultural responsiveness, many teachers admitted to partaking in both cultural collision and collusion. They discussed how they feel that do not or cannot relate to some of their students due to cultural differences, and that this inability to connect affects their overall expectations of certain students. Although this is disheartening, the acknowledgement of such feelings is a key step in the process of forming

genuine connections with all students. In order to surpass cultural and racial bias, people must first recognize the bias within themselves. Once this acknowledgement occurs, teachers and school leaders will be much more open to using strategies to overcome the bias. From there, they can work toward forming authentic and deep relationships with all students.

Strong connections between teachers, school leaders, students and families are crucial to creating the best educational experience possible for all students. However, it is also important for school leaders to work toward building relationships with the community. In the article *A Re-New-ed Paradigm in Successful Urban School Leadership: Principal as Community Leader,* Muhammad Khalifa describes how school and community overlap, suggesting that collaborations between school and community stakeholders benefit school, community and student performance. Khalifa also refers to Epstein's "theory of overlapping spheres" which states that students are more successful when the school, their family and the community work together to support students in their learning. In order for a school leader to truly understand the community, they must play an active role in community settings and work diligently to create trust among community members and families. Khalifa recognizes that building this trust is difficult, and to do so, school leaders must find out what the cultural interests of community members are, and use these interests as a way to form connections. Furthermore, Khalifa stresses the necessity of a shift in mindset. Traditionally, partnership between schools and the community have always centered on the interest and needs of the school. To form a true collaborative partnership, however,

school leaders must take community needs into consideration. In fact, Khalifa points out that the community may have goals for students and schools that are quite different than the goals that school leaders have.

In essence, Khalifa's article urges principals and school leaders to "move beyond their school walls in order to gain an understanding of the unique social and cultural conditions of their neighborhood communities" (478). This, he says, will benefit the school, its surrounding community, and most importantly will lead to student success. Greeley School is located in a very culturally rich and diverse community. The surrounding neighborhoods are a mix of people from different races, cultures, lifestyles and socioeconomic classes. Currently, there is not a lot of community outreach that takes place by the school leadership. Collaboration with community organizations, neighborhood groups, and community leaders would establish connections between students and their neighborhood. In turn, these connections would provide students with rich and meaningful learning experiences that would contribute to a well-rounded, holistic education.

In the end, helping students to reach their potential and be successful is a shared goal by schools, families, and the community. Despite the increasing demand put on teachers and school leaders to prepare students to take standardized tests as a measurement of success, all stakeholders must work together to create a dynamic and collaborative partnership. Together, all members of this partnership can look beyond this standardized measure of success and strive toward providing each individual student with the most optimal educational experience.

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