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ELL Families: Myths, Truths and Strategies for Engagement

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ELL Families: Myths, Truths and Strategies for Engagement

Parental involvement may be the strongest predictor of a child receiving a solid education. (Dervaries & O'Brien, 2011; NCES, 2017). Constantino (2018) affirms that engaging every family does lead to academic success. This extends more importantly to English Language Learner (ELL) families who are challenged by language barriers. The fastest-growing population in United States schools currently is ELLs (Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015). This means it is vital that educators understand the culture and the way ELLs and their families view education. Since literacy can lead to school success, according to the NCES, we as educators also must be proactive with the parents/families so that we can empower them with literacy strategies to ensure academic success.

Often, teachers assume that ELL parents/families are not engaged due to an uncaring attitude. According to Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008), ELL parents can feel frustrated with an educational system because they feel culturally misunderstood. This can then add barriers that inhibit their involvement in their child's education (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). This home/school partnership then becomes more challenging with this assumption. The fact that ELLs struggle could be due to economic struggle and family mobility, which are more common within the ELL population (Prosise, 2008). Also, many ELL families are not familiar with the school system and may be intimidated to speak up. We must first shatter this myth that ELL parents/families do not care. Then, it becomes the responsibility of an educator to empower and engage ELL parents/families to ensure not only a smooth transition into a new language and the school, but also to future success. Cook, Shah, Brodsky, and Morizio (2017) shared that by establishing and maintaining a continuous dialogue with families, there is a greater likelihood that families will be more engaged in the students' daily learning experiences. In this article, we will discuss the facts about ELL's and literacy. Then we will shatter the myth of disinterested ELL parents/families. Finally, we discuss ways to engage and empower parents and families.

Literacy in ELL students

In order for students to become proficient readers, it is necessary to provide a print rich environment (Hall & McNair, 2015). These environments may be less common in some ELL homes as the research has shown. This could be due to the lack of formal education within the family and lower incomes (Gonzalez & Uhing, 2008). Reading to a child at night or book sharing within the family may be non-existent. Perhaps the parents/families feel "self-conscious about mispronouncing or misspeaking English to their children" (Caeser, 2013, p. 331). These worries prevent them from engaging in any type of literacy help at home, thus aiding in the student's challenges in becoming literate. Moreover, migrant workers' children who may be ELL also suffer from academic failure due to constant relocation which results in lack of school attendance (Caesar & Wolf-Nelson, 2014). These two issues alone have led to the lower literacy rates of ELLs.

Shattering the myth of disinterested parents

When a teacher has a new ELL enter his/her classroom, it may appear as if the parents/families are not engaged due to a lack of interest. What is really going on? According to Tarasawa and Waggoner (2015), ELL parents/families may have had negative experiences with

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educational institutions or less exposure to formal schooling. They are not accustomed to coming in to meet with a teacher, and they are not used to open houses and conferences.

Moreover, teachers may be naïve of the not-so-obvious strategies that ELL parents/families are employing to encourage their child's schooling. When we think of "parental involvement," the term is rooted in past practices. According to Lightfoot (2004), when discussing parental involvement, insufficient attention is given to family-centered practices among "[ELL] populations and perpetuate the myth of noninvolvement among minority parents" (para. 2). Constantino (2018) encourages school leaders to evaluate the front office's setup and how the first people with whom visitors and family members interact should be friendly and welcoming. Therefore, it is vital that school leadership sees the ELL population as unique in that they can bring "funds of knowledge" to the classroom which is discussed later in this article. This can be considered an opportunity to bridge the gap and eradicate the myth that these families don't care about their children's education. DeMatthews (2018) asserted that by building a strong collaborative partnership with parents/families, school leaders are able to connect community resources with the families. When this occurs, not only do families feel trusted and respected, but also there is a sense of unity and continuity in the school community.

Strategies

Given these challenges, there are some proven and effective strategies that school leaders and classroom teachers can implement to engage and empower parents and families. Below are five such strategies that can be utilized immediately.

1. **Connect immediately.** We must be proactive in connecting with all of our students, but especially our ELL parents/ families. Once you as an educator get the students' information, write out a letter and have it translated into the language of that family. Include information about yourself, goals for your class, your availability and open-door policies, and that you will follow-up within a week to meet them personally.

Then stay true to your word and follow up with a personal phone call. Make sure you have a translator nearby to help you communicate. The goal of your call should only be to introduce yourself personally and to invite them in to have an initial conference. Then a face-to-face meeting needs to be your goal. If you leave a message, speak slowly so they may translate it. When you meet with them, it is important to begin the two-way dialogue so that they feel like a true partner in their children's education.

2. **Educate with love.** At the face to face meeting, ask the parent, "What do you want to see for your child? How can we here at school support you?" If the child is not yet in high school, asking what they are hoping to see before they pass on to high school opens the door for communication about goals for the student. Having loving motives is key because many of these families may not be able to participate in a traditional way. Therefore, it could be beneficial to engage in a dialogue on ways that families can partner with you in their children's education. Remember, we want to empower and engage our parents/families to see a bright future for their child, so asking these questions may prompt these vital conversations. Scholastic's Family and Community

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Engagement (FACE) website provides a variety of resources for teachers and administrators in starting and continuing conversations with families.

- 3. Equip and provide.** Providing opportunities for parents/families to come into the school after hours must occur. Holding parent education workshops can be a fun way to do this. Then, employ the teachers in the school to demonstrate useful techniques for reading to children, at-home games to play with children, and tips about helping with homework. Providing food and childcare will improve attendance. You can reach out to schools of education in institutions of higher education to recruit pre-service teachers to aid in providing childcare.

Encourage the parents/families to read to their child in their native language. Even providing a book bag filled with books takes away any objection. We want to keep their culture alive and celebrate it, and helping the parents/families help their children needs to be a priority. If parents don't have the book in their language or if they are illiterate, teachers can encourage families to share oral stories. Wordless picture books and graphic novels are other resources that can be provided to aid in this endeavor. Any activities to do with their children must be shared and modeled at these events.

- 4. Tap into family's funds of knowledge.** Funds of Knowledge is a term devised by Luis Moll (1992) and stressing the importance of prior experiences students that they bring with them to the classroom. What this means is that we must proactively bridge the gap between home and school by reaching out to parents/families in finding what they can contribute culturally to the classroom.

Maybe a parent can be a guest speaker to share traditions or celebrations. They may also know others in the community who could come in and share. The key is to find opportunities for ELL parents/families to become involved in the classroom in the way that fits them. Another idea is to hold a poetry/family literacy night or a way to share some student work. At these events the students and parents/families can contribute food and/or music to celebrate their culture. This way you are accomplishing celebrating work as well as getting the families engaged.

- 5. Prepare a long-term plan for ELL parental involvement.** Engaging families does not stop after the first week of school. We must be proactive and creative through the year. Start a collaboration with your local community organizations. There are organizations like The Latin American Youth Center (LAYC), which is a community-based organization located in the Washington, D.C. This may mean calling places in your area and coming up with ideas on how you can support each other. There are many community organizations that exist to support ELL students and families. They can offer tutoring, social services, medical needs, language classes for adults and citizenship classes.

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After you locate community services, make a brochure or handout for your ELL parents/families and make it available to them. The more we can do through the year, the more they will want to get involved and stay engaged in their child's education.

Conclusion

ELL families can become engaged and excited about their child's education. Therefore, we must delve deeper into our students' cultures because the importance of understanding our students and the culture they bring cannot be undervalued. We are looking to encourage and then empower our ELL families. Upon understanding our families, the next most important step is reaching out and building those relationships early then maintaining and growing them through the year. Promoting the contributions of ELL families will only help schools work for the benefit of the entire community.

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