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Increasing ELL Parental Involvement in Our Schools: Learning From the Parents

Engaging parents as advocates for school success in the home is particularly important for English Language Learners (ELL). Tapping into the experiences of ELL parents in their own lives about schooling and literacy is a resource educators can use to increase parental involvement. This article describes the stories of two parents and compares their experiences with schools, their personal views of literacy, and how the home environment might support school literacy and academic success.

THE CHALLENGES THAT ANY PARENT faces in supporting his or her child in school can

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be daunting, and these issues are often magnified for parents of English language learner (ELL) students as the parents themselves may have minimal proficiency in English and vastly different formal schooling histories. These challenges are identified here in order to empower schools and educators to involve ELL parents in the schooling of their own children. As educators, understanding the challenges that ELL parents may face is critical to fostering parental involvement in our ELL students' school experiences and, subsequently, supporting ELL students' academic success.

The current research on ELL parental engagement in their children's schooling has been limited. This article contributes a broader ethnographic view of parents and their own experiences via their children and recommends strategies to engage parents in their children's K-12 school experiences. Three main questions are addressed: (a) How do ELL parents view literacy and their own literacy practices? (b) What are the qualities of literacy practiced in their homes? (c) What are the issues specific to parent-child and parent-school interactions and communications that might contribute to school success?

Understanding the roles of social and family factors influencing second language literacy and language development is pertinent to this study. As a social unit, the family defines the expectations of a learner while mediating the influences of school, culture, and language (Panferov, 2002). Studies such as Burstall (1975) and Gardner (1985) show that parents have a positive effect on their children's second language learning. However, encouraging support by parents of ELLs can be difficult (Kozol, 1991; Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998) and complicated, depending on the parents' own experiences with and expectations for school, as well as English proficiency. For instance, Robson (1981) investigated semiliterate ESL speakers and found that previous experience with schooling influences how one succeeds in a second language formal learning environment. Bosher (1998), Collier (1989), and Muchinsky and Tanguay (1999) have found previous educational experience in the learner's originating country to be positively transferred to second language learning experiences. As such, expectations for how teachers and schools are supposed to act based on one's home country schooling experiences may color the ELL parents' experiences with U.S. schools.

As educators, we expect parental involvement with the schooling of their children to be important to students' success; however, we often know little or nothing about who the parents are and the realities of their own education. As part of a larger study, this article represents the stories of two parents from two different families. Two families were invited to participate in this study. One parent in each family volunteered to be involved and two children of differing ages elected to participate, as well. The Pavlov¹ family was invited to participate because of their strong Russian sociocultural affinity for literacy and the value of schooling. Also, it was felt that my fluency in Russian might more quickly establish credibility with the family. The Omar family was recruited due to the rapid rates of migration to the region by Somalis, as well as previous familiarity with me; I had taught one of their children in middle school.

A Tale of Two Families

The Pavlov family of four immigrated to the United States from Russia in June of 1999, due to economic reasons. In Russia, the father, Ivan, had worked as an accountant, and his wife had taught Russian literature in a Moscow middle school. The daughters, Marina and Sveta, then just 11 and 9, attended school as well. There are approximately 2,000 Russian-speaking immigrants in the Midwestern capital, and the Pavlovs continue to speak Russian at home with a circle of friends and family. Both Ivan and his wife are graduates of post-secondary institutes in Russia, although neither was working in their specialty during this study, as they both needed to improve their English. They make their home in a quiet green neighborhood in a cozy rented two-story home with individual rooms for both girls, where each had a desk and a study area. The shelves are lined with books and magazines and the walls are adorned with the girls' artwork. Although, at the time of this study, the Pavlovs did not own a television, they did have a computer and used it frequently to access information and communicate with friends and family.

Marina and Sveta were enrolled in elementary school during this study. Both received ESL instruction in pull-out programs and spent the majority of the school year generally excelling in all subject areas. Both also received glowing grade reports and generally enjoyed school.

The Omar family immigrated to the United States in 1997, stopping first in Florida for several months before moving on to the Midwest. They migrated via an arduous route that led them from the war in Somalia to refugee camps in Kenya and then, finally, to the United States. In Somalia, the family enjoyed a certain status as the father, before being killed in a bombing, had worked at a high level ministry of health position. The mother, Hadiya, had a secondary education and had worked in a financial department for the government. Some of her older children began school in Somalia before the collapse of the schools, others attended school in the refugee camps in Kenya, and others did not have any

formal schooling until they arrived in the United States. Hadiya now lives with her second husband, three of her children, and her own mother. She has several children scattered across the United States. At the start of the study, both her daughter, Fatima, and her younger son, Abdi, lived with her. Halfway into the study, at age 17, Fatima married and moved across town with her new husband. The Omars are part of a large community of nearly 17,000 Somali speakers that has grown tremendously in recent years, building up community resources in stores, restaurants, clinics, and businesses as a group.

The Omars make their home in a small two-level apartment in a housing project just off a major freeway in the city. The children do not have desks, but rather study at the kitchen table or in the living room sprawled across couches amid the commotion of the household. At the time of this study, the Omars did not own a computer, but they did have two televisions in the living room, which ran almost constantly, though one was primarily dedicated to video games. There were no books or other printed matter visible except plaques with prayers in Arabic hanging on the walls.

During this study, Abdi and Fatima were enrolled in high school. Both were spending the majority of instructional time in a pull-out ESL program, with content courses being mainly electives (such as art and physical education). Both were regularly in trouble at school. Shortly after the study, Fatima was struggling to graduate and Abdi had dropped out of school.

For the study discussed here, data were gathered through numerous observations, both in the Pavlov's and Omars' home and school settings, and through interviews and questionnaires with the family participants and respective teachers. The results of the triangulation of these data were grounded with attention to the stories of the parents and the research questions at hand.

A Tale of Two Parents

To understand the socio-historical and cultural issues informing the parents' views of literacy,

I explored how they recalled literacy practices of their youth and their reports of their current English use and literacy practices in their adult families.

Ivan

Ivan, the father, was a 44-year-old educated family man and graduate of a business management institute in Moscow, Russia, where he also studied some computer programming. When he arrived in the United States, he first studied English in a community-based ESL program, and then matriculated into a community college to study computer programming.

As a child, Ivan recalls learning to read when he was 8 years old. Although he did not do any reading before beginning school, he does remember his mother reading children's books to him. In turn, he remembers later reading those same books to his younger sister and, eventually, to his own daughters. He recalls seeing both of his parents read newspapers and classic books and occasionally writing letters to relatives. His first experience of learning a foreign language, German, began in high school and continued later in the tertiary institute.

Hadiya

Hadiya was a 51-year-old Somali mother of five children. She grew up in a very different Somalia than the war torn country of this decade. The country was generally divided into English- and Italian-speaking influences. Hadiya's mother did not know how to read or write, but her father was literate in Italian. As a child, she recalls seeing her father read and having him read stories to her. Her mother would tell bedtime stories to her, as well. Later, Hadiya told her own children stories and read stories to them in Somali. Hadiya's earliest memories of reading and writing are linked to religious studies. Hadiya was sent to school for 12 years, where she studied science, math, geography, biology, and chemistry in Italian.

Literacy, English, and Their Worlds

When asked to comment on what he thought it means to be literate, Ivan responded that it means that a person is able to read and understand books, newspapers, and Web sites. He explained that literacy develops solely as the result of schooling. He contrasted this with oral skills when, for instance, a person might be able to listen and understand a language and speak in response, but if they are not literate they are not able to write a response.

In addition to reading an occasional classic book for fun, Ivan regularly reads documents for work and deals with bills and school memos for family issues. He gets his news from both Russian and English newspapers and Web sites. News from Russia comes via the Internet or letters written in Russian. Culturally, Ivan seems to think that Russians read more than Americans. He reports that in an average week he reads four English newspapers, such as the local newspaper, and job postings on local Internet sites. His English writing is limited to what he does regularly for work and for that, he explains, he often works from a template or form letter to write thank you letters, resumes, or cover letters. Occasionally, he also sends instant messages for work in English. Ivan writes letters and e-mails totally in Russian when he corresponds with family and friends in Russia. He claims that he is immersed .5% of a day in English and 99.5% in Russian. Although he speaks Russian with his family and friends, he does attend school 5 days a week for about 7 hours each day, where he is exposed to greater levels of English.

Similarly, a typical week for Hadiya is spent nearly completely in her native language, Somali. When our study began, Hadiya was enrolled in a workforce training program that was designed to train Somali women in childcare skills, with the aim of employing them with functional workplace English. She then spent nearly 7 hours a day during the week at the childcare center. A few months later, she completed the program; however, she never took on a childcare job, but cared for her mother at home. She had plans to begin taking adult ESL classes in a free city

program, but she never enrolled. In fact, near the end of the study she claimed some days to not ever speak any English.

Hadiya considers literacy to be the importance of reading and writing. She explained that, in her view, reading and writing are more important than listening and speaking in a language. Hadiya also believes that reading and writing are important both in Somali and American cultures. She thinks that the purpose of learning to read and write is to get a job. Any writing that Hadiya does is quite limited. She stated that she occasionally writes letters in Somali. Any English writing that she does is limited to writing bills. Reading for Hadiya is limited to the Quran. Any reading that she does in English is deciphering school communications or bills and, occasionally, some magazines in English.

To understand what home literacy practices and family expectations for and about school might best engage ELL parents and consequently support school success, I explored the qualities of literacy practiced in their home and issues specific to parent-child and parent-school interactions.

One issue to consider is the role of parents in creating a positive learning environment in the home. Studies have shown that a home-school gap can develop when school learning is not reinforced at home (Mace-Matluck et al., 1998). Second language school literacy seems to hinge on three main opportunities: access to books and/or technology, structured study time, and regular reading and writing exposure. In this regard, the Pavlovs and Omars differed greatly. For instance, although the Pavlovs provided the girls with numerous books and texts both in Russian and in English, as well as computer access to the Internet, the only reading material found readily in the Omar home were scattered mailings and magazines. As the Omar children were considerably older than the Pavlov children, they were often left unsupervised in the home with their senile grandmother. Consequently, the children rarely ever spent time at home studying, but rather preferred to watch TV, talk on the phone, or play video games. In contrast, in the Pavlov home, the girls had a designated time to

do homework and often the parents would sit down and help them with their assignments. Although Hadiya understood that it was important to help her children in this manner with their homework, she felt disempowered, due to her own English language struggles, to help them and flailed her arms helplessly to indicate this frustration to me.

In terms of the family home being specifically supportive for developing second language literacy skills, reading and writing exposure in the home is crucial, as building literacy in the home, in turn, supports school literacy, which is essential to academic success. In the Pavlov home, reading and writing in both Russian and English were common. Reading, in fact, had begun with the parents reading to their girls as infants. Meanwhile, as the girls attended school, both parents modeled how important reading and writing were by reading and writing in Russian and in English. Both parents read and wrote for household duties such as dealing with mail and writing letters. Both also regularly read books for pleasure and wrote letters to stay in touch with friends and family. In the Omar home, Hadiya occasionally read and wrote bills in English and composed letters to friends and family in Somali, but on much less frequent basis than the Pavlovs. The extremes were illustrated in the stories of Ivan's wife hiding Russian books from their daughters to encourage them to read in English, while Hadiya's youngest son did not even recognize that his mother or sisters ever read or wrote beyond religious practice. The Pavlov home was conducive to learning to read and write in English, whereas the Omar home did not emphasize school learning as much. As such, one might say that the Pavlov children were able to transfer their home literacy practices more readily to their school literacy. It is not surprising, then, that the Pavlov children were stronger school readers and writers.

Another issue to explore is how expectations for academic success, both in and out of school, are supported by the parents. For instance, in the United States, regular attendance at school is necessary and expected. The Pavlovs all attended

school regularly, as they had in Russia, except for a few illnesses. However, both Fatima and Abdi missed and skipped school on numerous occasions. Abdi even once asked me the minimum number of days of school he would have to attend in order to pass to the next grade. His attitude staunchly contrasted with those of Sveta or Marina, who both hated to miss school even when they were sick. Compounding this, many of Fatima and Abdi's missed school days came as a result of suspension for discipline issues. Both were caught fighting with classmates, skipping classes, and talking back to their teachers at various times. In contrast, Sveta and Marina's teachers generally had only positive comments about their behavior.

Another issue that surfaced was the type of parent-child interactions and parental authority demonstrated in the homes. One of the distinctive characteristics of immigrant and refugee families is that children often quickly surpass their parents' proficiencies in the new language and, as a result, are called upon to interpret for family issues that they might not normally have ever been exposed to because of their young age. This was the case for both the Omar and the Pavlov families. Both Ivan and Hadiya were far less proficient in English than their children. None of the children enjoyed dealing with these situations, although they were willing to help their parents navigate the linguistic hurdles of bills, letters, and other English communications in their new homelands. Although Ivan and his wife tried to call on their daughters only minimally for this help, Hadiya depended heavily upon this support as she read and wrote only minimally in English and found no support from her second husband. His authority and presence as a stepfather was minimal, if at all present. As a result, the roles of parenting became blurred for Hadiya's children and her parental authority was challenged, but Ivan's remained steady.

Another point of contrast between Hadiya and Ivan was the level of their involvement in their children's education and the amount and type of communication with the schools. School communications with parents range from either positive and praising of the student, to

negative and informing parents of disciplinary or learning issues. For the Pavlov family, nearly all communications sent home to the parents were positive about the girls. The opposite was true for the Omars, with most messages sent home being about disciplinary actions to be taken against Fatima or Abdi. These communications were sometimes muddled in that they were sent home via Fatima or Abdi, and either did not reach their mother or she had to rely on the children to honestly translate the content for her. Occasionally, the Omars' schools provided announcements in Somali, but there was no guarantee that these were delivered to Hadiya either. In the Pavlov's case, especially when the girls were both in elementary school, the parents knew to expect weekly memos about homework assignments. As such, the Pavlovs maintained open, positive lines of communication with the teachers and schools and were able to keep track of most of the assignments required of their children. This, however, was not the case with the Omars, leaving a communication divide between Hadiya and her children's schools to be traversed mostly only with negative messages.

Implications

We know as educators that we must engage parents and students in partnerships with us to promote and motivate students. Parents must be able to advocate for their children's schooling and literacy development. However, this advocacy must be culturally relevant to the parents and commensurate with their own formal learning experiences. Schools that successfully help ELL parents navigate school challenges offer both two-way communications and parental guidance for effecting positive home support of school pursuits. School communication strategies that proved to be helpful for these parents were regular, multimodal (written and spoken forms), and ideally offered in the parents' first language. Messages that were not only reporting negative or disruptive behaviors, but also conveyed positive content, were also helpful in establishing an open line of communication between parents and

schools. Home visits were highly valued and established mutual respect for both the home and school cultures.

Personal interviews with the parents about the best modes of communication for them are recommended. Many school districts rely on television and radio broadcasts for dissemination of information in critical situations, but neither would have reached the parents in this study. Establishing telephone call trees, listservs, texting, or Internet Web-communication systems might reach more parents provided that these technologies are available to the families. Additionally, new parents might be encouraged to be paired with a buddy parent to help the newer parent navigate school communication systems and know what to expect and whom to contact. Tapping into multilingual media outlets through the bilingual community might also reach ELL parents.

Another strategy of engagement is to consider how to educate parents more directly about the ways in which they can help their children with school work. Some districts offer bilingual parent workshops about the opportunities for parents to be involved. Scheduling of such sessions must consider work schedules and child care in order to make attendance possible for the parents. Given the potentially limited home access to books and study support materials, it is also helpful to offer parents access to libraries, labs, and other resources.

Schools might also encourage ELL parents to volunteer in classes or at school events to promote information about the home language, in order to continue to support home language literacy and minimize subtractive bilingualism. Providing resources in multiple languages is critical, as is showing the value of all languages and the maintenance thereof. Creating opportunities for parents to engage in sharing their home cultures and their own expertise transfers a positive attitude to ELL children about their first language and learning experiences.

We need to continue to learn how to better encourage parental involvement in the community schools and improve ELL school readiness, especially if parents are not literate themselves,

or have had little or no previous formal schooling. More long-term qualitative studies are needed, both for the academic community and for the students in and out of our classes.

In this multidimensional world, education is becoming more diverse and more complex with fewer of our students (and our teachers) fitting into traditional monolingual monocultural school molds. As teachers, teacher educators, and school administrators, learning the stories of our ELL students and their parents will increase parental involvement and enrich the educational experience for all.

Notes

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1. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

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