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How Can We Collaborate?

Moving past communication dysfunction in public school communities

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Faculty Sponsor: Jack Dougherty Community Partner: Rhodes Elementary School*

◆ ABSTRACT

Parental Engagement at Rhodes Elementary School has decreased. This is cause for concern because parental engagement is critical to the academic success of children (Jeynes, 2012). This study therefore addresses the question: **What are the barriers to effective communication between public school educators and the families they serve?** It is argued that communication dysfunction between families and schools can contribute to an increase in "negative social capital" and in turn produce barriers to successful collaboration between schools and families. Through in-depth interviews and participant-observations at school events, this study shows that the formation of "negative social capital" creates a greater disconnect between the school and the home by reinforcing a relationship built on distrust and miscommunication. The lack of communication exists because the school has difficulties addressing the needs of parents. Language barriers further hinder equal partnership between staff and families. The goal of this research is increased parental involvement in the educational process. The mechanism to achieve this goal is effective collaboration with bilingual parents.

◆ INTRODUCTION

Significance

- Parental Engagement means attendance at school conferences, student-family functions, and active participation inside and outside of the classroom (e.g. volunteerism, helping with homework)
- Most scholars agree that parental participation influences life outcomes of children in urban areas (Noguera, 1996).

Research Objective

- This research considers the barriers to effective communication between public school staff and the families. The goal is increased parent involvement in the educational process of their children.

Models of Parental Engagement

- Homework Checking: Parents regularly sit down with their children to review homework assignments and ensure correct answers, to the best of their ability. (Jeynes, 2012)
- Shared Reading: Parents are encouraged to read with children at regularly scheduled times. (Jeynes, 1993)

Successful Models of Parental Engagement

- Studies show that the most successful models of parent-teacher relationships are those based on mutual respect, partnership and good communication between educators and families. (Jeynes, 2012) These models include frequent parental communication with receptive teachers who show interest in the well being of the students they service.

Why don't parents attend Parent Teacher Meetings?

- 40-60% of working-class and lower-class parents miss parent teacher conferences. (Lareau, 1989) Rhodes has higher participation rates, but the utility of these conferences is low for parents.
- Since teachers and administrators often live away from the community they serve, they may not relate to and understand the daily experiences of the children and their families. This creates a barrier to an effective partnership (Noguera 1996; Haymes 1995). Language barriers between staff and families can magnify communication problems.
- Teachers often have trouble switching code and explaining professional educators' jargon to parents. This leads parents to feel intimidated and a sense that it is their responsibility to "decode" the information.

◆ HYPOTHESIS

"*Negative Social Capital*" in public school communities (lack of trust in school staff and administrators) leads to communication dysfunction between schools and families, in turn producing more barriers to successful collaboration between schools and the families they serve.

*The names of the school and school staff have been changed.

◆ METHODOLOGY: Qualitative Case Study

Literature Review

- Parental Engagement and Communication
- Models for Improvement in Academic Performance
- School-Family Relationships

In-depth Interviews

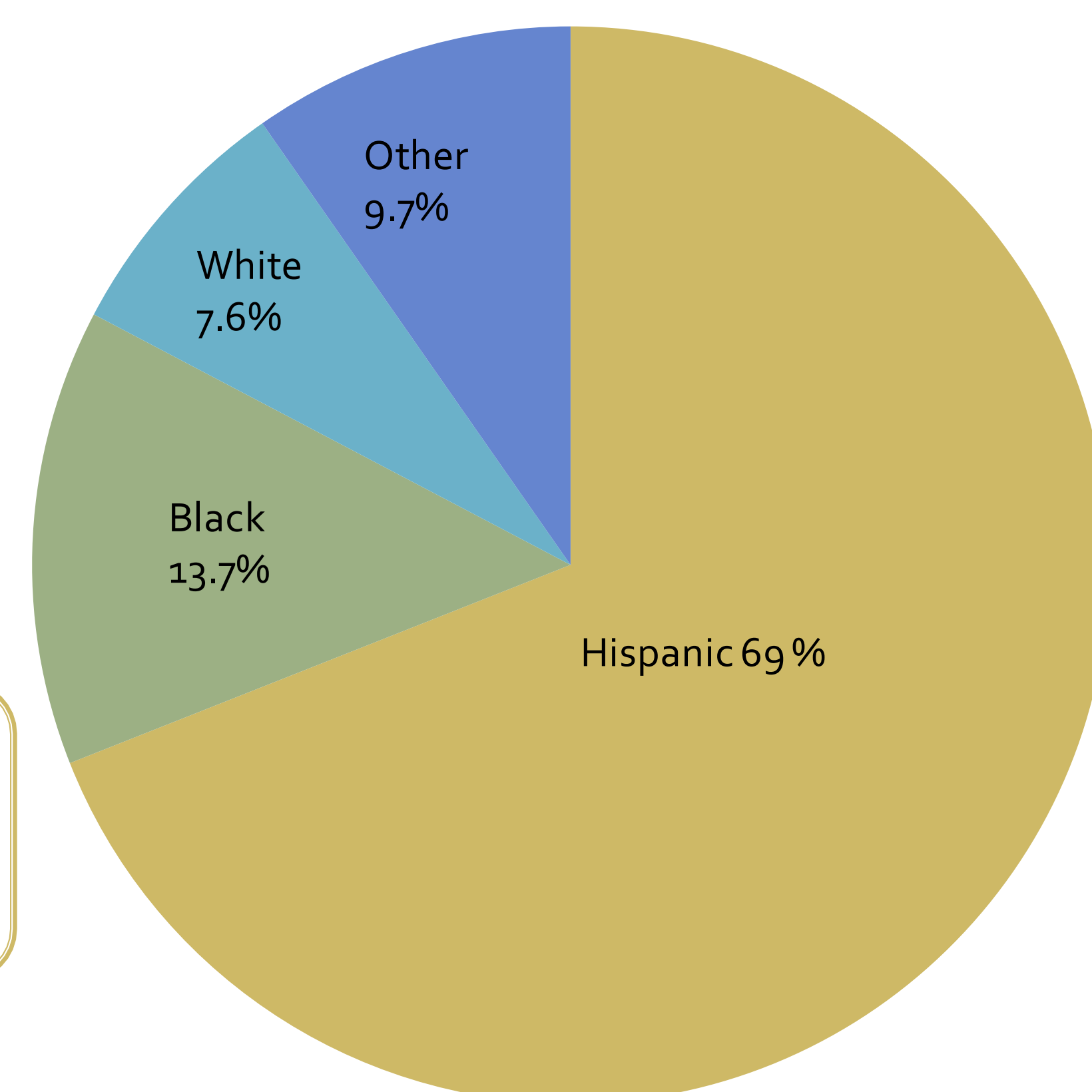
- 13 Families
- 5 Teachers
- 2 Administrators

Participant Observations

- School Meetings Between Parents and Teachers
- Meetings Amongst School Staff

◆ SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

At Rhodes Elementary, 69 % of Students are of Hispanic Descent (352/525 students) and 13.7% (72/525 students) are of African American Descent. (CSDE)



In addition, over 95% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunches. Of the families in this community, over 30% of the families who were employed yielded an income below the poverty line, as compared to 10.9% for the state average. Yearly income for families in this community range from \$20,000 to \$29,000:



At Rhodes Elementary School, the figure for income levels below the poverty line was nearly 65%. On average, teachers income ranged from \$45,000 to \$92,000. The percentage of staff members who are minorities is nearly 28%.

◆ FINDINGS

Two Principal Reasons for Low Parental Engagement and Collaboration:

1. Lack of Connection between School Staff and Families

- Rhodes Elementary has seen three principals in the past decade. Principal Jackson replaced the former Principal, Ms. Lidinelli, who was very involved in the community and related well to the families she served.
- Jackson was very vocal about how he expected parents to be involved in the educational process. Under her, Rhodes lost a partnership with a local youth services non-profit organization which was an integral part of the community.
- The different relationships that each Principal has with families and the community they serve shapes the extent to which the next principal is able to be involved. The parents interviewed viewed Jackson very negatively and questioned whether she had the best interest of the families in mind. In this case, "one rotten apple spoils the bunch."

2. Dumping and Unrealistic Expectations

- Dumping is when teachers and parents "dump" their problems in each other's laps without collaborating to find solutions for the students. Teachers tell what offense the child committed and say the parent must do something about it. Parents claim the teacher is responsible for a child's bad grades or bad attitude. (Curwin, 2012)
- Rather than working together to find a meeting time, parents feel unwelcome or uncomfortable meeting with teachers, and teachers feel parents are unwilling to make time to meet.
- In some cases when school staff are disconnected from the communities they serve, they become *desensitized* to the constraints under which families must operate, specifically, the difficulties in caring for children under conditions of inadequate economic resources. Parents are working, caring for their children and ensuring that there is enough food on the table which limits time available for parental engagement in the educational process.

◆ RESULTS

About Rhodes Elementary School

Rhodes is a public elementary school serving student in grades K-5. The student population is extremely diverse: students come from over 30 countries, and minorities represent 92% of the student body. In 2011, students scored lower on standardized state testing than did their counterparts in schools around the State.

Parents Perceptions of School Staff

"They are alright. I think that they should consider doing meetings and conferences at night so that we can be there. I like to know what's going on." – Parent, 3rd Grader

"I would like to have more opportunities to speak with teachers, more community events and things like that, as long as they're not during the day, I can go, they should try to do more stuff like that." – Parent, 2nd Grader

"Maybe if there were more chances to come into the school, I would come to talk to teachers. I don't know that I am always welcome here -- it seems like sometimes, that they just kind of don't really want us around...or that maybe we are not so smart like a teacher -- but that does not make me a bad parent...school is just a building, teachers are just people." – Parent, 3rd Grader

Staff Perceptions of Parents

"Dealing with the parents is a struggle, a constant uphill battle, there is no end in sight." – 2nd Grade Teacher

"I know that parents might not feel that the support is there, from teachers or administration. However, I truly believe people want to do good for their kids, we just have to start thinking about them differently..." – 5th Grade Teacher

"Most parents in this neighborhood are happy to have a job -- missing work or in some cases, sleeping in or taking care of errands before work, these are non-negotiable. Some parents are very good, they've taken their lunch break to come and meet with me. If I know they're getting out of work late, I'll always make a point to stay and wait for them...I want to one day be able to say the same of some of my colleagues..." – 4th Grade Teacher

◆ CONCLUSION

- Positive Social Capital is generated when parents and teachers make time for each other. By viewing the other as a partner, parent-teacher relationships can create a social network of parents who are engaged in the school. This network can help bridge the gap that teachers experience when trying to deal with parents for whom English is not their first language.

- This research shows that when the school creates more options for parents (including alternative communication methods and school-community events and parent-teacher meetings held in the evening), it creates the possibility for parents to become familiar with the classroom teacher. This in turn means that parents are more likely to be involved in the school, because they feel they are seen as a partner in the educational processes of their children.