CROSS-CULTURAL POLICY ISSUES IN MINORITY AND MAJORITY PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Virginia P. Collier
George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia

Parent involvement in public schools in the United States has always been an unresolved issue. School staff frequently bemoan the lack of parent involvement in schools. Usually teachers want parents to attend parent-teacher conferences, to volunteer for assistance such as accompanying students on field trips or preparing food for fund-raising projects, to help their children with homework, and to ensure that their children attend school regularly. However, perceptions of school staff of parent involvement, and parental perceptions may conflict considerably when issues of control of the school surface. The fact is that in U.S. public schools, parents have little or no decision-making power.

Many experiments with community control of schools have come and gone. One example was Barbara Sizemore's short-lived PACTS plan for the District of Columbia Public Schools, in the early 1970s. Parents, administrators, community members, teachers, and students (PACTS) formed decision-making councils to govern the schools. All five groups could have an equal voice. Parents were very vocal, and professional educators felt the system was chaotic. The experiment ended in less than one year. Similar stories could be described for many of the urban school systems. D.B. Tyack, an educational historian, describes this conflict over power and school control issues as a continual pattern within urban U.S. public schools in the twentieth century, with educational personnel generally winning most of the battles for centralization, standardization of curricula, and institutionalization of what he calls "the one best system." These battles were won by educators at the expense of all the diverse community interests (Tyack, 1974).

Today we seem to be in an era which includes an unusual mixture of relative toleration of cultural pluralism while dominated by conservative policies on the national scene, which in turn influences what are generally conservative school board policies. School boards and school personnel are concerned about improving minority achievement but are uncertain what to do to bring about changes. School personnel want minority parents to be more involved in schools because they feel that ultimately parent involvement will improve minority achievement. But the tension is not easily resolved between professional educators' perceptions of the role of parents in schools and parents' expectations of what their role should be--between simple parental support of school policies with home reinforcement of school skills, versus parents as advocates and change agents at the decision-making level.

Majority Parents. Cross-cultural concerns related to this tension are endless. Majority parents have greater access to the possibility of participating in school decision-making. Majority parents are largely of middle-class background. They have more control over political and economic resources than minority parents. The school program is designed to serve the needs of majority children. Their first language is standard English, the prestigious language of the society, with institutional support. Majority parents' language and cultural identity is developed and maintained at school (Dolson, 1985).

Language-Minority Parents. In contrast, language-minority parents are a diverse group with diverse needs. Large numbers of language-minority parents

come from a working-class background, yet most have aspirations to middle-class status. There are immigrant minorities who have moved more or less voluntarily to the U.S. for economic, social, or political reasons. There are indigenous minorities who have become incorporated involuntarily into U.S. society through slavery (Afro-Americans), conquest (Native Americans, Mexican-Americans), or colonization (Puerto Ricans, Native Hawaiians) (Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986). There are language-minority parents of every conceivable language and cultural background, including great variety in educational background, social class, and experience. They come from rural and urban settings, as well as technological, industrial, or pre-industrial societies. There are also many language-minority students without parents, in this case the unaccompanied minors who come from war-torn countries.

In contrast to majority parents, language-minority parents have much less access to control of resources. They may not yet be proficient in English, the language they need for access to resources and potential influence in school decision-making. Their first language is a subordinate language which is undervalued in the U.S. and has little institutional support (Dolson, 1985). They may feel strongly that their children are acquiring unacceptable and immoral values at school (Bui Duc Ton, 1978). They may want to take an active role in directing their children's educational development or they may prefer to rely on the authority of school personnel to decide what is best for their children. Most of all, language-minority parents want their children to succeed academically and yet some are aware that some minorities continue to experience persistent disproportionate school failure (Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986). They want to change this pattern. Some preliterate parents feel the most powerless of all.

Given this enormous range of diversity among parents, both majority and minority, how can we develop an appropriate model for cross-cultural parent involvement in U.S. schools? Egalitarian principles tell us that we can aspire to encourage participation of all citizens in the total life of the society. Although we do not always provide easy access to participation, linking the life of the school with that of the community in all its diversity is one means of helping all parents achieve a stronger sense of ownership in the education of their children.

Parent Advocacy in Bilingual Education. Probably the most dramatic attempts at increased language-minority parent participation have occurred in the development of bilingual education programs in the U.S. Creating a curriculum which has a closer link to community language and cultural patterns would seem a natural context for greater minority parent access to schools. Yet there have been many struggles and hundreds of unresolved issues remain.

Some bilingual programs were initiated through language-minority parents' advocacy, lobbying, and planning efforts, such as those in Dade County, Florida (Mackey and Beebe, 1977); Boston, Massachusetts (Ambert and Melendez, 1985); Los Angeles, California (Ovando and Collier, 1985; a city in Michigan (Benavides, 1979); Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Guskin, 1981); Wilmington, Delaware (Waserstein, 1975); Rough Rock, Arizona (Wabaunseem, 1977), and Washington, D.C. (Collier, 1980). Since the Lau v. Nichols (1974) Supreme Court decision, bilingual parent and community groups have increasingly taken their cases to court to force schools to implement educational programs more appropriate to the needs of their children. However, Ambert and Melendez (1985:257) point out that instituting lawsuits does not necessarily imply continuing parental involvement once the court order is issued, because educators again resume the leadership in the school program.

Parents as Teachers' Aides. Another form of parent participation has been through joining the system as professional educators. Many language-minority parents have been hired as teachers' aides in bilingual programs. With time these aides have pursued coursework to be fully certified and have thus joined the system and created their own small spheres of influences on decision-making.

Parent Advisory Councils. The Title VII Parent Advisory Councils mandated by the Bilingual Education Act were also designed to provide another form of parent participation. However, in analyses of the effectiveness of these advisory councils, most studies have shown that they have little decision-making power, but operate at the lowest levels of citizen participation, placation and sanctions (Cruz, 1979; Matute-Bianchi, 1979; Rodriguez, 1979). The main function parent advisory councils seem to serve is to improve or change parent behavior rather than to allow parents to improve or change the educational program (Rodriquez, 1979). Rarely do parent advisory councils operate at the most powerful levels of parent participation: serving as checks and balances for the school system and as change agents.

Parent Leadership Training Institutes. Another strategy some school districts have taken is to provide parent leadership training institutes such as those in Chicago (Cerda and Schensul, 1979) and California (Ogbu, 1978). The Chicago project developed and trained parent advisory councils, helped parents move into elected positions, provided teacher in-service training on community relations, and disseminated information to parents. The California training combined minority and majority parents and educational staff from many school systems to discuss and resolve issues of common concern in schools and to develop mutual cross-cultural understanding.

Parent Education. This type of training is very effective with upwardly-mobile language-minority parents who have some formal educational background and potential leadership skills. However, there are many language-minority parents who need parent training that includes instruction for their own educational development. York (1979) describes parent participation in a Mississippi Choctaw bilingual program which incorporated parental decision making combined with use of parent resources and development of parents' literacy skills. Choctaw parents participated in program decisions, clarified conflicting values and goals, and helped develop instructional materials. At the same time they participated in Choctaw literacy programs and organized a writer's workshop to create Choctaw literature based on oral traditions.

Title VII parent education funds have supported evening and weekend courses for parents to develop ESL, literacy, and math skills for those parents who have not had the opportunity to receive a formal education. Some programs have modeled skill building through curricular materials designed for parents to work with their children and learn together at home (Cervantes, Baca and Torres, 1979).

Parent education is even more effective, however, when developed in the form of problem-posing dialogues between parents and educators, who are considered an equal partnership. The model of second language and literacy training developed by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, is powerful in its consciousness raising and development of leadership skills. As Wallerstein (1983a:191) explains:

> Freire encouraged people to view themselves as active creators of culture, not passive recipients of history. He believed people

> create and recreate their culture as they earn a living, pass on values, and interact in social groups. By encouraging students to believe in themselves as agents of change (p. 191).

In developing curricula for parent education, it is valuable to adopt some of Wallerstein's (1983a; 1983b) interpretations of Freire's approach for a U.S. context. Three stages of the approach involve serious listening to students (through observation similar to that of an anthropolgist and participation in community life); dialogue (in which students and teachers become equals as they share personal needs, hopes, concerns, and develop mutual understanding); and critical thinking and action (e.g., parents' rights, ways to improve the environment, access to upward mobility and a decent life). Through basic classes in literacy, math skills, and ESL using Freire's approach, parents and teachers can join in a partnership that leads to greater parental leadership and participation in the decision-making process in schools.

Integrated Minority-Majority Parent Involvement. We have discussed models of parent involvement in which language-minority parents have become vocal advocates of change or have been empowered with new skills to become more effective participants in the schooling process. We also have to address ways to integrate minority and majority parents' concerns in a cross-cultural context. Usually in a majority-minority parent context, even with the best of intentions, majority parents ultimately dominate power decisions, *if* the school staff allow any parental decision-making to take place. sometimes serious conflicts can occur between majority and minority parents' wishes. Frequently minority parents withdraw in frustration or they leave the decisions to those who have had more formal education or those who speak English well and can articulate their concerns.

Parent training may ease the process and help minority parents to participate more effectively. Even more effective have been those few programs where minority and majority parents are placed on an equal status, in two-way and immersion bilingual schools. Two-way bilingual schools, using two languages of instruction, effectively integrate majority and minority students and parents with common goals. Students must learn each other's language and experience the other's culture through a bilingual curriculum, and parents learn to function in a bicultural context in the school. Both languages and cultures are valued in the school and each language is given 50 percent of the total academic time.

Immersion bilingual schools were first developed in Canada to provide instruction in French to speakers of the dominant language, English. A fairly typical early French immersion program provides all instruction in the second language, French, for kindergarten and first grade. English language arts is introduced beginning in second grade. By fourth grade, half of the academic curriculum is taught in French and half in English.

This model has been adopted in some 30 U.S. public schools and is becoming increasingly popular. In the U.S., immersion schools where the language taught is the native language of language-minority students of that community, these students are invited to participate if they so choose. For language-minority students, the immersion school becomes a bilingual maintenance school, in which they receive their first two years of literacy instruction and basic school skills in their native language and then are gradually introduced to English until by fourth grade all students are receiving half their academic instruction in English and half in the other language. Immersion bilingual programs that are integrated, two-way schools have been extremely successful with majority and

minority student academic achievement, for students of both lower- and middle-class backgrounds, and of many ethnicities (Genesee, 1985).

Since both two-way and immersion bilingual schools are for all students and they are enrichment models, the stigma of compensatory educational programs is avoided. Majority and minority parents frequently become enthusiastic advocates for acquiring second languages and attend after-school classes to learn the second language along with their children (Forsythe, 1981). Parents of immersion programs have even started a new professional organization, Advocates for Language Learning, which is composed of equal numbers of both parents and professional educators.

Issues on majority and minority parent involvement in schools are complicated, and school personnel are reluctant to share their power in educational decision-making. But there are hopeful signs of increased language-minority parents' participation in the process of majority-minority parent-school cooperation. Let us all work for continuing empowerment of language-minority parents and for models of effective cross-cultural school-community educational settings.

References

Ambert, A.N., & Melendez, S.E. (1985). Bilingual education: A source book. New York: Garland.

Benavides, A.H. (1979). A midwestern bilingual community and its schools: An analysis of mutual images and interactions. In R.V. Padilla (Ed.), Ethnoperspectives in bilingual education research, Vol. 1: Bilingual education and public policy in the United States (pp. 212-228). Ypsilanti, MI: Eastern Michigan University.

Bui Duc Ton. (1978, May). The attention of Vietnamese refugee parents on their children's education in San Diego City Schools. Paper presented for the Seminar in Asian History, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA.

Cerda, M.B., & Schensul, J.J. (1979). The Chicago Parent Leadership Training Program. In Working with the bilingual community (pp. 15-27). Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

Cervantes, H.T., Baca, L.M., & Torres, D.S. (1979). Community involvement in bilingual education: The bilingual educator as parent trainer. NABE Journal, 3(2), 73-82.

Collier, V.P. (1980). A sociological case study of bilingual education and its effects on the schools and the community (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California). Dissertation Abstracts International, 41, 2481A.

Cruz, N., Jr. (1979). Parent Advisory Councils serving Spanish-English bilingual projects under ESEA Title VII. In Working with the bilingual community (pp. 37-44). Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

Dolson, D.P. (1985). The application of immersion education in the United States. Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

Forsythe, T. (1981). A second language is just part of growing up at Milwaukee's language immersion magnet school. American Education, August, 1981.

References (Continued)

Genesee, F. (1985). Second language learning through immersion: A review of U.S. programs. Review of Educational Research, 55, 541-561.

Guskin, J.T. (1981, April). Bilingual education community study: Implementing bilingual education in an urban midwestern context. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles.

Lau v. Nichols, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

Mackey, W.F., & Beebe, V.N. (1977). Bilingual schools for a bicultural community: Miami's adaptation to the Cuban refugees. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Matute-Bianchi, M.E. (1979). Parent and community participation in federally funded bilingual education: A view from the bottom up. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University).

Ogbu, J.U. (1978). Cross Cultural Resource Center: Institute on Parent Participation: An evaluation report. Sacramento, CA: Department of Anthropology, California State University, Sacramento.

Ogbu, J.U., & Matute-Bianchi, M.E. (1986). Understanding sociocultural factors: Knowledge, identity, and school adjustment. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), Beyond language: Social and cultural factors in schooling language minority students (pp. 73-142). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, Los Angeles.

Ovando, C.J., & Collier, V.P. (1985). Bilingual and ESL classrooms: Teaching in multicultural contexts. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rodriguez, R. (1979). Citizen participation in ESEA Title VII programs. In R.V. Padilla (Ed.), Ethnoperspectives in bilingual education research, Vol. 1: Bilingual education and public policy in the United Sates (pp. 260-280). Ypsilanti, MI: Eastern Michigan University.

Tyack, D.B. (1974). The one best system: A history of American urban education. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wabaunsee, A.J. (1977). Native American viewpoint. In Bilingual education: Current perspectives, Vol. 3: Law (pp. 65-70). Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Wallerstein, N. (1983a). The teaching approach of Paulo Freire. In J. W. Oller, Jr., & P.A. Richard-Amato (Eds.), Methods that work: A smorgasbord of ideas for language teachers (pp. 190-204). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Wallerstein, N. (1983b). Language and culture in conflict: Problem posing in the ESL classroom. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Waserstein, A. (1975). Organizing for bilingual education: One community's experience. Inequality in education, 19, 23-30.

York, K.H. (1979). Parent/community involvement in the Mississippi Choctaw bilingual education program. In Working with the bilingual community (pp. 29-36). Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.