

## **Asian, Latino and African-American Families' Perspectives and Involvement in American Schools**

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In addition to sharing with you a review of the current literature on what parents of various races and ethnicities want and need from public schools today, I will draw from my own interactions with the parents I have worked with during my twenty years in education. I will discuss my experiences as both a public school teacher in high-poverty, inner-city communities as well as a private school teacher and business owner of an after-school reading and math program, where I worked with well over one hundred families. I come into this review with biases from these experiences. From working with families in inner-city Houston, I found that the parents were supportive of the work I was doing with their children. When I had one student who was repeatedly off task, I called his mother, and she came and sat right next to him the next day in class. I did not have a problem with him for the rest of the year. The parents I worked with were worried for their children. Gangs and drug dealers were vying for their attention, for their lives. Parents wanted to know what was happening in school so that they could keep their children on track. It unnerves me to hear someone say that “urban parents don’t care.” In my experience, nothing could be further from the truth. These parents did not have the resources suburban parents have to help their children be successful in school, they may not be home as often due to working long hours, double shifts, or two or three jobs, but they care for their children deeply.

I learned also from my experience owning a math and reading center that Asian students are not born smarter than other children; their parents just work them harder. I had an Asian Indian friend who shared with me that her only job was to educate her children. Her mother-in-law did all the household work so that she was free to educate her one-year-old son. Out of the

188 students I taught at my math and reading center, over one hundred of them were Asian-Indian. This is not because the students needed remediation, but because their parents wanted them to have an edge over other American students. Asian students study on average six hours more a week than other students (Chen & Stevenson, 1995). Does this mean Asian parents love and care for their children more? Of course not, but school teachers and administrators tend to look at Asian families as the “model minority,” while they have a deficit view of Latino and African-American families. This is not productive in helping our nation progress to one in which all Americans have equal opportunity to become whatever they want to be or what they are called to be in life. It is more helpful instead to acknowledge the barriers all three of these groups have to participating in their children’s education more fully so that schools might better meet these families’ needs and expectations of their children’s schools.

Research studies show that when schools develop best practices to help parents become involved in their children’s education, the students improve their achievement, attitude and behavior (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001) (Epstein, et al., 2002) (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) (Peng & Wright, 1994). Asian, Latino, and African-American families all have demonstrated concern for their children’s education and an understanding of the value of education in American society. As observed in Table 1, these ethnicities view their role in their children’s lives by supporting them at home by assisting with homework (African-American and Asian), encouraging them (all three ethnicities), educating their children on morals and behavior (Latino), and sending their children to supplemental educational services (Asian). Because many families from all three ethnicities have insufficient knowledge of either how American schools work or lack an education themselves, all improvement efforts in American education should include programming that educates parents on how to support their children in their academic

success (Peng & Wright, 1994). For schools to get more parent involvement from families of these cultural groups, however, they must meet the families halfway. Learning what the cultural groups value, what their expectations are for their children’s educators, and what they are already doing and what they are willing to do with support is a starting point for educators to get families of color in the schools and consequently make steps toward closing the achievement gap.

Table 1

Culture	Values	Parental Involvement Strategies	Desires for School
Asian-American	Self-control, responsibility for relatives, respect of authority, educational achievement (Chen & Ho, 2012)	Reducing household chores, using folk stories to motivate students, purchasing workbooks, establishing study times, going to the library, teaching the three R’s before kindergarten, enrolling in language and music classes on weekends, assisting with homework. (Hidalgo, Sau-Fong, & Epstein, 2004) At-home activities more than at-school.	Educational achievement, rigor, teachers who are serious (Gowda, 2006)
Latino-American	Collectivist family characteristics, Interdependence, respect, wholistic education (Educación) (Martinez, Cortez, & Saenz, 2013)	Monitoring, Communicating, motivating, protecting (Hidalgo N. , 2000) At-home activities more than at-school activities	Translated information, transportation to meetings (Martinez, Cortez, & Saenz, 2013)
African-American	Communalism, Spiritualism, Social time perspective (Boykin, 1986)	Home-based encouragement, expectation of college, homework support (Hayes, 2012)	Equity in course enrollments, high expectations (Wallace, 2013) (Noguerra & Akom, 2000) (Hayes, 2012)

In order to understand what each of these three cultural groups need from schools, I will first explore what each group values and what it is already doing to support their children in their

educational pursuits. I will then share what exemplary schools are doing to meet the needs of culturally diverse families and/or what still needs to be done.

### **Values of Asian-American Families**

Asian-Americans define their cultural identity in terms of academic achievement, (i.e. “To be a scholar and do well in school is to be Chinese.”) (Hidalgo, Sau-Fong, & Epstein, 2004). The stress on educational achievement comes from the Confucian belief that education is the key to achieving a higher social status. Asian parents instill in their children that deficiency can be overcome by working harder. Achievement is due to effort more than ability (Chen & Ho, 2012). This paradigm is in contrast to other ethnicities that have a more fatalistic view on life (e.g. Latino, Italian, African-American).

Emotional and material support for parents and the elderly are also high values in the Asian culture. Respect, love, and taking care of the older generation’s needs as well as complying to the wishes and demands of them are often reflected in students’ success in school (Chen & Ho, 2012). If the filial obligations come from an authoritarian relationship, however, Asian children may rebel or reject the expectations of the family. Even if the students do not respond in opposition to the parents, the high expectations for achievement can undermine the students’ success by causing great stress and pressure. When the filial obligations are tied to a more authoritative relationship of mutual respect and care, Asian children tend to adopt their parents’ and elders’ values as their motivation to succeed in school (Chen & Ho, 2012). The parent expectations in the authoritative relationship are viewed by the children as care, support, and confidence in the children’s abilities. Consistent with the Confucian value of education, Asian parents also tend to invest in their children’s education. They often pay for expensive education enrichment programs, such as Kumon Math and Reading centers and Japanese

Saturday schools to give their students an edge over other students academically. Asian parents also stay involved in their children's education by restricting after-school activities, assisting with their children's homework, and creating study-friendly home environments (Chen & Ho, 2012).

As an owner of a Kumon Math and Reading center, I witnessed the willingness for Asian parents to pay over \$200 per month, per child in order to give their children homework beyond what they were getting in school. Over 80% of my student-customer base was Asian. When I tried to recruit more Japanese students because Kumon is a Japanese-originated company, I learned that the Japanese of my community were already spending all day Saturdays in Japanese school, where they not only learned about their Japanese history, culture, and language, but also progressed in math beyond the American schools' curricula. Kumon is popular among Asian families because not only does it offer a large amount of homework every day of the year but Christmas day, but its curriculum has students working at their own pace, progressing well beyond American schools. I often had students working two and three years beyond their grade level in both math and reading. As a Kumon owner, I was evaluated based on the retention rates of the students. I never had to worry about my Asian families quitting the program. Most of them were enrolled in the program until their children were graduated from high school or completed the program, whichever came first. This is in stark contrast to Caucasian families who struggled to commit to the program for even one year. Other extra-curricular activities took priority in their lives, both with schedule and costs. It was clear that the Asian families prioritize education for their children over any other pursuit.

Pong, Hao, and Gardner (2005) contend that Asian parents are actually less likely to talk about school matters or school plans or to help their children with their homework than

Caucasian parents. The expectations for academic excellence are higher than Caucasians though, and Asian parents are more likely to have stricter rules about earning good grades. This study also found that East-Asian families were more likely to invest “more aggressively” in financial, human, and within-family social capital than families from other racial groups. Consistent with other research (Hidalgo, Sau-Fong, & Epstein, 2004), Pong, Hao, and Gardner (2005) found that immigrant families in their study were not likely to join any parent-teacher organizations, volunteer at the school, attend class events, or talk to the teachers about their children’s progress.

### **Bringing Asian Families into the School Community**

In the case of Asian-American families, schools have an opportunity to better serve their children by making ways for Asian families, especially first-generation ones, to become welcome and comfortable building relationships with the teachers and administrators of the school community.

Lee and Manning (2001) suggest several ways that American schools can better serve Asian families. To begin with, Asian families want school personnel to respect, not just their immediate family, but their extended family as well. Teachers need to be ready and accepting of families who come to school events and meetings with multiple generations.

American teachers also tend to have a broad view of the Asian culture instead of making themselves knowledgeable on the specific nationalities of their students. Some teachers, according to Lee and Manning, assume all Asian students are either Chinese or Japanese. The Asian community, however, has four major ethnic groups with differences between each and within each group. These groups include Pacific Islander, Southeast Asian, East Asian, and South Asian. The experiences of students from different Asian groups can be starkly different (Lee & Manning, 2001). For example, students from East Asia may be coming from a more

industrialized country with many opportunities for education, while students from Laos may come from a more agrarian experience with limited education. Students from India will most likely have a different religion than Asians from other subgroups. These factors will have an impact on students' educational experiences. Teachers and administrators can build trust among their Asian families by asking about their specific culture and its traditions, customs, holidays, etc. This can take the form of a more formal written survey at the beginning of the school year, or a personal form by inviting the family in for a getting-to-know-you meeting.

The Asian tendency to view teachers with great respect can actually be a deterrent from Asian families participating in their children's school experience. They are more reluctant than other cultures to challenge the teacher's authority. Initiating contact with teachers or administrators, asking questions, or sharing insights about their children is rare because they do not want to be perceived as disrespectful (Lee & Manning, 2001).

The school can break through the Asian families' hesitancy by having organized events often that encourage all families' attendance. They can also personally invite the Asian families to come in to talk about their children's progress. The school faculty and staff need to make it clear to the families that they welcome and expect parental involvement. Asian families, even older generations, can help at the school with preparing instructional materials, assisting teachers, working with small groups of students, assisting with translating for newcomers from their nationality, or supervising children at lunch or on the playground, much like Caucasian parents already volunteer to do (Lee & Manning, 2001). Because Asian parents may be new to the American expectation of involving parents on campus, though, it is important for schools to reach out to their Asian families so that they feel encouraged to spend time at the school.

Lee and Manning (2001) warn teachers and administrators against assuming that every Asian family member is going to have a language barrier. Again, it is important to not stereotype, but instead get to know each family and their needs. If there are Asian families who are recent immigrants and do not speak English fluently yet, it is helpful for schools to communicate important information through email and their website. This will allow the families to utilize their translation devices and other resources to understand. Most schools already have translators at school meetings for non-English speaking parents, but it is important to make sure the families know that this service will be present at the meetings so that the families are more likely to attend.

Most Asian families want their children to continue using their native language in order to stay connected to their culture and become bilingual. It is important that the school respect this and encourage their students to share their culture and use their home language when possible (Lee & Manning, 2001).

Educational systems in most Asian countries are very different from those in the United States. For example, the Asian culture often views academic or behavioral problems as shameful. If the school needs the students to receive services for a learning disability, or even to learn English, the families may view this need as a negative reflection on their family (Lee & Manning, 2001). Consequently, educators should point out that the special program the school is giving their child will offer the child an opportunity to learn and develop. Hidalgo et. al. (2004) suggest setting up telephone networks, offering ESL classes in the schools, co-sponsoring with local colleges a guest speaker program featuring prominent Chinese Americans from various fields, and offering a course called “Parent, Child, and the School” to learn about the school system.



Lee and Manning (2001) suggest that schools implement educational programs that are designed to give Asian parents the opportunities to learn about the American educational system and even teach English classes for them so that they can help their children in school. This kind of programming is already happening for other ethnic groups, including for African-American and Latino families. In London, England, the Risley Avenue Public Elementary School also offers classes for their many immigrant families to learn English and British culture. The program also teaches the parents what to expect from their children's school experience and how to help them with their homework. By serving the families in this unique way, the school is serving the children and the community through educating the parents. Because the parents are attending classes and workshops there on the same campus as their children, they feel more comfortable and less intimidated coming to meetings and other school events.

### **Values of Latino Families**

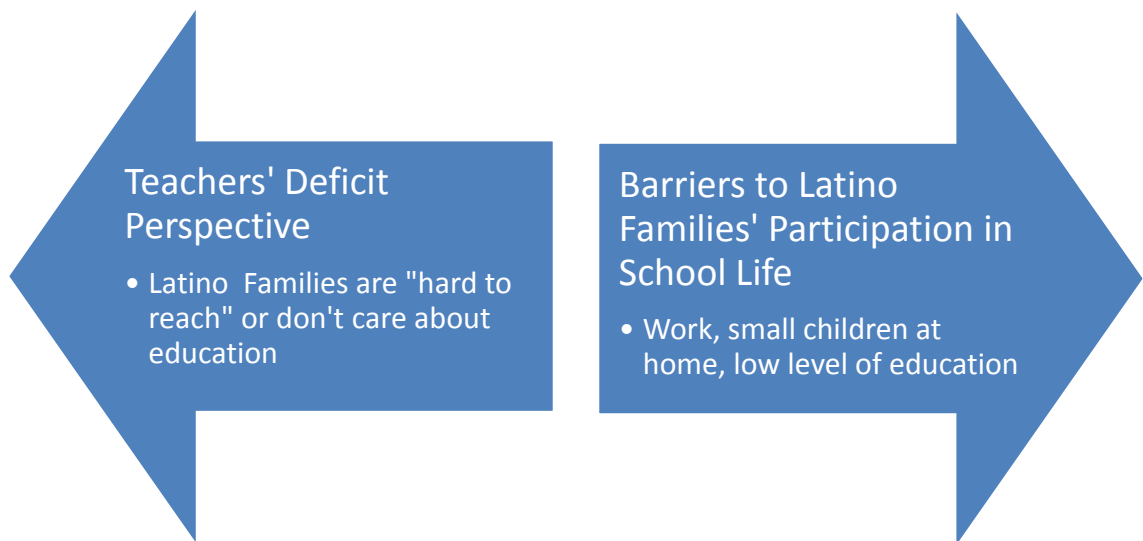
Much like the Asian families' reverence for teachers, Latino families also consider teachers the experts on education. They often feel intimidated by teachers, so they are less likely to ask questions about assignments or grades. Because Latino families view the teachers as experts in education, they may not teach their children a lot before they attend school. They do, though, value and live out "*educación*," which is a belief in educating the whole child. *Educación* includes educating the child in spirituality, morals, behavior, and respect as well as academic education (Martinez, Cortez, & Saenz, 2013).

While the Asian obligation to family centers around "honoring" the family with achievement and status, the Latino culture has a "collectivist" value in which families work together interdependently to survive and thrive. Just as some Asian families tend to have multiple generations living together under one roof, so do Latino families. For schools, this

means again that they should be ready to welcome extended families to school events and meetings.

Figure 1 illustrates the conflict schools tend to have with Latino families due to the teachers' and administrators' assumptions versus the real challenges Latino families face when trying to connect with their children's schools.

Figure 1



### **Bringing Latino Families into the School Community**

Teachers must move from a deficit paradigm to a servant leadership philosophy. Instead of thinking and behaving as if Latino families “don’t care” about education, they should get to know the families personally and learn what it is that keeps them from participating in school life. They can improve family participation in schools by helping the families eliminate the barriers that keep them from coming to school events and meetings.

Martinez (2011) found in her study that Latino students do not typically ask their parents for homework help because they do not believe their parents have the academic knowledge to help them with the tasks. About 41% of their sample population stated that they do not ask their parents for help with homework because their parents are not familiar with the material, do not have a strong grasp of the English language, or did not go to school. Additionally, the students surveyed shared that their parents worked long hours or night shifts, making them unable to help with after-school work.

Schools can work to provide resources to help Latino families overcome structural barriers that prevent them from participating in their children's education and schools. For example, by providing translation services, transportation, child care, or greater flexibility in scheduling events, schools might increase participation rates among Latino parents who may not be English proficient, have access to cars or child care, or work jobs that allow them the flexibility to attend school meetings. Schools should also consider having the meetings at neighborhood centers where families can walk to attend. Parents would be less likely intimidated in neighborhood centers with which they are familiar (Martinez, Cortez, & Saenz, 2013). By doing so, schools would not only send the message that parents are important to schools, but they would also be in the neighborhoods their students are coming from, which can teach them more about the students and families they serve.

Martinez, Cortez, and Saenz (2013) studied Latino parents' beliefs about college readiness and school support. They shared that parents wanted the schools to provide visuals and simple step-by-step instructions that are easy for them to follow for applying to colleges and for financial aid. Parents shared their frustration with schools telling them they need to "apply to colleges" or "apply for financial aid" without showing them how to do so. Sending home

college information in English only also hindered parents from helping their children get into college.

In addition to sharing parent experiences and beliefs from their own study, Martinez, Cortez, and Saenz (2013) discussed a program studied by Johnson (2009) called the “Abriendo Puertas” (Opening Doors) program, which assists Latino families by sharing college information and skills to help prepare their children for college. Abriendo Puertas was conducted by Latino parent volunteers. Parents revealed in this study that they often felt “stigmatized” or “isolated” by public schools in part because of socio-economic status, language, and immigrant status (Johnson, 2009).

Koontz’s and Harper’s (2005) suggestions for engaging black parents in school communities can also be applied to reaching out to Latino families. They created “training modules” that helped parents understand how the school system operates, learn how to voice concerns about their children to teachers and administrators, understand guidelines for parental involvement, and understand mandates of special education. This program included training that would help parents see their important role in their children’s education. Within this model, role playing and modeling taught parents about using behavioral management techniques, “understanding the dynamics of administrative meetings, asking questions, requesting meetings, and presenting themselves as informed decision-makers” (63). Parents were also taught educational professional terms and knowledge so that they had a more informed context when attending school meetings. Actually coaching the parents to contact the school system and developing a script for them to use to arrange a meeting was also an effective part of this program. The content of the script included the purpose of their call, their plan to invite consultants to the meeting, and the times and dates of their availability for the prospective

meeting. Scaffolding parents' initial contact with the schools can promote continued communication by breaking down invisible barriers such as lack of confidence and lack of experience in conducting formal communications. Some schools hire parent coordinators to encourage parent participation and conduct home visits. These liaisons help the parents become "insiders" at the school (Rubio, 1995).

### **The Achievement Gap and Parent Involvement**

Noguerra and Akom (2000) contend that scholars, school leaders, and teachers alike explain the achievement gap with a deficit paradigm.

Dysfunctional families, lazy and unmotivated students, and the 'culture of poverty' in inner-city neighborhoods are all frequently cited as causes of the gap. Left overlooked and unaddressed are the conditions under which children are educated and the quality of schools they attend. (p. 29)

It is common for critics to explain the achievement gap as a socio-economic problem, but research has shown that black students from middle-class families perform lower than low-income Caucasian students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Why is this the case? Are African-Americans innately intellectually inferior? Of course not. The culture of the school favors white students. Students of color are often "reseggregated" into lower track classes and special education in desegregated schools. For example, when I taught in a Houston school district, I taught the inclusion classes; my students were a blend of regular education students and special education students. I had over 90% students of color in my classes, while my colleague who taught Honors English had about 75% white students in her classes, even though the school was 3% white (US Department of Education: Institute of Education Sciences, 2011-2012).

To reverse the effects of racial and economic inequality in the classroom, three measures must take place, according to Noguerra and Akom (2000): 1. Raise salaries so that teaching would attract top-notch college graduates; 2. Ensure that poor children have access to well-qualified teachers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and to schools with adequate resources; and 3. Provide parents in low-income areas with the means to “exert greater influence over the schools their children attend” (31). Scholars in the field of education recognize the importance of parents becoming an important part of the school culture and landscape. Practitioners in the field, then, need to bring theory into practice by finding innovative ways to make this happen.

### **Values of African-American Families**

The African-American value of communalism is similar to the Latino one. Families come together to help one another survive. The definition of family extends beyond even blood lines to friends and fellow church members. African-Americans’ sense of spiritualism encompasses more than the church walls; it manifests itself in all they do and perceive. This can be seen in their high-context tendency to think holistically. Social time perspective is the habit of mind that time does not control the person, but the person makes use of time in the way they see fit (Boykin, 1986). For example, African-Americans are more likely to continue an important conversation rather than stop it because they are scheduled for another meeting. All three of these values work together and are consistent with the value of others over the material world. All three of these values are also in contrast to the culture of the American school. Being on time when shifting classes every forty minutes, fragmenting disciplines, and a competitive atmosphere all contribute to an unnatural culture for African-American students to learn in. Bringing parents in to inform

the school on what would be more culturally-responsive for their children would help to close the achievement gap.

### **Bringing African-American Families Into the School Community**

Hayes (2012) found that African-American parents were more likely to promote school success in their high school adolescents by engaging in more frequent conversations about school and learning as opposed to engaging in direct school-involvement activities or by only having high values about academic success. He found that adolescents continue to benefit from their involvement when it comes in the form of positive parent/adolescent communication. His study illustrated how older adolescents missed fewer days of school and received fewer discipline referrals when parents engaged in higher levels of home-based involvement. School-based involvement, however, was negatively related to certain achievement outcomes in older but not younger adolescents. Older adolescents that had high levels of school-based involvement were viewed by parents as having greater behavioral problems as evident by increases in discipline referrals. This appears to be the result of parents coming into the school when their child is having a school-perceived behavior problem instead of coming to the school for positive communication or for preventative measures.

African-American parents may not get as involved in their children's school lives because they believe teachers are the professionals and subsequently are better suited to make decisions concerning their children's education. Parents may also like to be more involved at the school and at home, but feel schools only encourage their passive support and they should not interfere with what the school is trying to achieve (Wallace, 2013).

Crozier (1996) observed that when six parents expressed their concerns about their child's school, such as the faculty's inability to meet the needs of ethnic minority children, the

faculty's low expectations for black children, and the faculty's unwillingness to test black children for either learning disabilities or accelerated education programs, "their voices were silenced, their concerns overlooked, and their involvement criticized" (2).

Wallace (2013) studied another parent group called CAAP, or Concerned African-American Parents, who attempted to get involved in their children's schools in a more meaningful way by advocating on their behalf. While they were successful in establishing a few student groups on campus, for example the Rising Scholars and Soaring Scholars programs, they were less successful in classroom visits where teachers found them "intrusive." One of their student groups required students to leave class to meet with their mentors, which teachers found to be disruptive. Some teachers did not cooperate with the program for this reason. Teachers were also reluctant to attend after-school tutoring sessions to help students in the Enrichment Center that CAAP created. Wallace's account of the CAAP's attempts to change the culture of their children's schools are consistent with Crozier's (1996) study. Wallace (2013) found similarly in his own case study, individual parents are marginalized when "failing to participate in ways that are deemed legitimate and appropriate" (207).

After following CAAP and observing the school's negative reaction to their meaningful participation in moving the school forward in student achievement, Wallace (2013) concluded, ". . . It would seem that schools should harness the support and participation of all parents, not dismiss it. To do so, however, school's parental involvement policies must embrace the diverse and individual experiences, visions, and values of ethnic minority parents. If schools genuinely value parent involvement, then parent contributions must be legitimized" (207).



## Conclusion

While immigrant families may need assistance in learning the logistics and culture of the American schools in order to become a part of the school community, African-American and second and third generation Latino and Asian families need to be met by their school leaders and teachers with a willingness to let their participation take a more powerful and progressive role. All three of these cultural groups have important values to offer: high value for education, reverence for elders, communalism, and spiritualism all of which would change the landscape of the American school in a positive way. Allowing families to become a genuine part of the school community is a start in making schools in the United States truly diverse and equitable.

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