

Book Review

The Power of Parents: A Critical Perspective of Bicultural Parent Involvement in Public Schools

by Edward M. Olivos, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Oregon
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In The Power of Parents: A Critical Perspective of Bicultural Parent Involvement in Public Schools, Edward M. Olivos has added complexity yet at the same time clarity to the field of “parent involvement” in K-12 schools. He skillfully uses a structural inequity framework to intelligently analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct bicultural parent involvement, in particular Latino Parent involvement, in a nuanced and authentic manner. As a teacher-researcher, he boldly explores how Latino parents can empower themselves to help democratize education through their collaborative voices and action.

According to Olivos, the field of parent involvement has been infiltrated with literature that perceives parents, especially nonwhite parents, as deficient and subsequently the research emphasizes how these parents can change their behaviors to positively affect their child’s academic achievement. In addition, the author directly challenges contemporary parent involvement researchers to look at the macro-level instead of the micro-level study of Latino parents and students. Studying parents has been done in the past but without creating new solutions. In fact, one can argue that it has done more harm than good. For example, the early work of Lewis (1965) is a prime example of how Latino families were perceived deficient based on cultural characteristics. While Herrnstein and Murray (1994), used genetic-based explanations to explain the inferiority of people. The main argument proposed by Olivos throughout his book is that Latino student underachievement and low bicultural parent participation are the result of a complex socioeconomic and historic structure of dominance. In addition, the U.S. education system being part of this structure of dominance

helps create and recreate asymmetrical power relations based on race, class, and gender and that the most effective way to oppose this system is to become cognizant of the contradictions found within it. Therefore, Latino parents must begin to understand their roles within the socioeconomic and historic context from which their subordination and their children’s academic failure arises if they are to effectively contribute to the transformation of the school system.

This notion of tensions and contradictions is key to understanding Olivos’ structural analysis within a school context. The author gives the following example to highlight “tensions and contradictions”. Schools proclaim the desire to have meaningful parent involvement. They want parents to support the school in as many ways they can. Yet when bicultural or working class parents get involved and begin to question and challenge unjust school policies, then the school system tries to defuse and pacify parent voices without acknowledging the need for policies to change. However, if Latino parent voices begin to grow the school’s desire to have them “involved” is replaced with an effort to label the parent leaders as “trouble makers” and to discredit them without seriously acknowledging their position.

In his last chapter, Olivos shares a parent involvement analysis paradigm based on social commitment and developmental consciousness of school personnel and Latino parents. Within this framework, the weakest paradigm of parent involvement begins with a functionalist and structural functionalist approach where the parent involvement centers on ensuring that the parent community conforms to the dominant values of the school’s culture. In addition, only if

parents “help out” can they take advantage of available services and resources but without questioning school policies, programs, staffing practices or standards. The third level, conflict theory, focuses on addressing social and educational inequities that have been created by the dominant culture and embedded in the practices of the school’s culture. This paradigm is concerned with the Latino parent community becoming a co-participant in the decision-making process of the school.

Ultimately, Olivos advocates and promotes a transformative paradigm seeking an involvement process that promotes Latino parent and student participants in the construction of knowledge, dialogue, and as agents of creating and recreating meaning in the improvement of the school. The focus is on creating culturally democratic participation in developing and implementing social and educational policy that develops social responsibility and the human condition—socially, cognitively and politically.

In conclusion, *The Power of Parents: A Critical Perspective of Bicultural Parent Involvement in Public Schools* is a must read for any parent, community activist and educator that wants to go beyond the traditional parent involvement literature that focuses on school-centric policies and programs to a more transformational paradigm that promotes Latino parent advocacy and empowerment. This text might very well be the beginning of a “new wave” of critical parent engagement literature building from the previous work of other critical theorist (i.e. Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Nuñez, 1994; Ochoa, 1997).



References

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