

## **Improving the Academic Performance of Hispanic Youth: A Community Education Model**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the creation of the Oakwood Family Education Center, a community-based education center created using the principles of liberation theology as the change strategy to attempt to improve the educational achievement of Hispanic students through community involvement and empowerment. Results from interviews with 16 parents show that lay leadership was activated at the center and that parents believe their children have benefitted academically by having the opportunity to get assistance with homework in a nurturing, community-based environment. Results suggest that Hispanic parents are willing to become active participants in educational improvements, provided that appropriate opportunities are created.

### **Improving the Academic Performance of Hispanic Youth: A Community Education Model**

Hispanic children and youth as a whole have not done well in the public school system. A large percentage of the Hispanic people in the United States suffer from social, educational, and economic disadvantages, and Hispanics remain the most undereducated major segment of the U. S. population (Fox, 1996). Low educational achievement has been a major barrier to their advancement in U.S. society (Villegas, 1991).

The demography of this country has changed dramatically in the last decade; the U.S. population is not only becoming older and poorer, but also more linguistically diverse. The current Hispanic population numbers about 22.4 million, and will, in all likelihood, continue to grow at a very rapid pace. Hispanics are expected to become the largest ethnic minority within the early part of the next century (Fox, 1996). The impact of these demographic trends reach beyond the school system; they will be critical to the labor force as these students make the transition from the classroom to the world of work. Thus, from a policy perspective, it is critical to understand the factors associated with low educational attainment and limited success, which Hispanics experience in U.S. schools (Valencia, 1991). Specifically, schools will need to

search for better ways to motivate Hispanic students to stay in school and develop ways to engage them in the educational process.

This paper examines the creation of the Oakwood Family Education Center, a community-based education center created through a collaborative effort among bilingual teachers, parents, and community business leaders. The core principles of liberation theology were selected as the change strategy used to attempt to improve the educational performance and achievement of Hispanic students through community involvement and empowerment. By selecting liberation theology, it was hypothesized originally that such outcomes as the emergence of lay leaders, an enhanced sense of community, and the eventual academic improvement of Hispanic youth would arise.

Consequently, the goal of this paper is to describe the creation of a Hispanic educational center and to investigate certain outcomes as a result of this creation. Those outcomes are the creation of a sense of community, the emergence of lay leadership, and the eventual academic improvement of Hispanic students. The research was taken from the perspective of parents in the community and primarily guided by the following questions:

1. How did the creation of the center contribute to building a sense of community?
2. How did the creation of the center contribute to the emergence of lay leaders?
3. What changes occurred relating to the academic improvement of Hispanic students attending the center?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The creation and formation of the Oakwood Family Education Center can be understood in a base community setting. The center came to fruition through a collaborative effort on the part of the Oakwood residents, bilingual teachers, and business leaders. Instead of relying on methods and strategies germane to American culture, the constructs of liberation theology were selected as a conceptual framework for empowering the target community and helping it to promote active involvement in the educational process. By choosing liberation theology and some of its constructs, teacher leaders adapted a change strategy that culturally and operationally fit the community and its problems. In a similar vein, contemporary theorists such as McLaren (1998) have translated the theological literature and developed the concept of critical pedagogy to analyze the failure of urban schools [see also, Aronowitz & Giroux (1993); Sleeter & McLaren (1995)].

### **Liberation Theology**

Historically, liberation theology arose in Latin America as a human response to the large-scale suffering that is so manifest there (Haight, 1985).

Liberation theology was and is a reaction against the naked poverty that assails the lives of so many human beings in the southern continent. Thus, it arose as a theology of the poor, for the poor, and on the side of the poor, committed to the liberation of those who are literally in captivity (Brown, 1990).

Liberation theology provides a conceptual lens for viewing critical reflections by educational practitioners in their efforts to build communities, promoting the emergence of the laity into positions of leadership. Community is an empowerment construct in liberation theology. The context of liberation is shaped by the experience of oppression, within groups who become conscious of this and come together to work with a sense that the situation must change.

Liberation theology originated in Latin America and is shaped distinctively by the Latin American situation (Brown, 1990). It is an effort to relate the teachings of the Christian faith to the lives of the poor and oppressed. The name most frequently associated with Latin American liberation theology is that of the South American priest and theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*, first published in 1971, continues to be the basic text of liberation theology both in its challenge to modern first-world theologies as well as in its constructive formulation of a theology for Latin America (Pottenger, 1989).

Gutierrez (1973) defines theology as critical reflection on the activity of the Church. Gutierrez uses the term "praxis" to mean action with reflection. "Reflective action" is very real at the level of grass roots pastoral work. Using "praxis" as a guide, liberation theology sees the Church and the world in terms of class; within the social classes the poor are most favored by God. The first act of the liberation theologian is action on the part of the poor and on the side of the poor. Liberation theology means learning from the experience of the poor.

### **Paulo Freire: Conscientization**

In Brazil, Paulo Freire launched his educational movement among the poor. Education, in the understanding of Freire, is the practice of freedom and depends on a political decision to make persons fully active in their concrete situation (McGovern, 1989). He wanted to empower illiterates, to raise their consciousness of their own fatalism — to conscientize them — and to motivate them to take charge of their own lives (Brown, 1993).

The strategy of conscientization developed out of Freire's project of liberation education, which was articulated in his major work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Liberation theologians adopted from Freire's work the process of conscientization, a type of critical theory that helps persons to become emancipated agents in their social contexts. Conscientization, in this understanding, is not only a matter of undertaking new projects and learning new skills; more fully considered, conscientization enacts freedom, creating a new human subject (McGovern, 1989).

Freire's work has been used widely in literacy campaigns throughout Latin America. Freire (1970) proposes that education should be "liberating" and that it be structured as a mutual ongoing process between co-learners. Education is the practice of freedom and depends on a political decision to make persons fully active in their concrete situation. Liberating education stimulates consciousness to emerge through constant problem-posing in which persons think about the problem and its social context in a critical fashion.

Freire based his articulation of a pedagogy of the oppressed upon what he saw happening in his own work with indigenous people. At the same time, liberation theologians began to articulate what was happening among these same people from a theological and spiritual perspective. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff (1987) noted that liberation theology borrows from Freire's conscientization. They presented the strategy of liberation as "the oppressed come together, come to understand their situation through the process of conscientization, discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and act in a coordinated fashion" (p. 5).

The "Freire method" has given Church people, social workers, educators, and organizers a sense of what to do, whether directly in literacy classes, or in using the conscientization approach to help the community come together, articulate its needs, and become organized (Chopp, 1986). Conscientization is, in liberation theology, a project of freedom that takes place in small, basic Christian communities.

### **Base Christian Communities**

Within the Roman Catholic Church, few lay movements have attracted as large a following in such a short period of time as have the base Christian communities, CEBs (comunidades eclesial de base), or base communities, as they are known. During the second half of the 20th century, the groups have sprung up in middle-class and socially disadvantaged sectors of society in countries throughout the world (Barreiro, 1982). These communities vary in size, usually between 10 to 30 persons in a group. They come together about once a week to pray and to discuss problems and how to act upon them (Chopp, 1986). The groups are "communities," not just weekly discussion groups. They strive to form a mutual support group, sharing in each other's cares and struggles. They constitute the poor, the marginalized persons in Latin American society. Base communities frequently use concepts developed in liberation theology; many base communities follow the liberation methodology: seeing, reflecting, and acting (McGovern, 1989).

Base communities or base Christian communities are educational models which bring together the strengths and cultural characteristics of Freire's model of empowerment (Dorrington, 1992). Such organizations not only provide models of empowerment but actually empower members of the community, for example, through their participatory decision-making structures, their community-organizing and lobbying efforts, and their outreach community

educational programs (Azevedo, 1987). Base communities also serve an important indirect political end: They are developing a whole generation of Latin Americans in leadership skills (Berryman, 1987; Brown, 1993). The Church is empowering lay persons to a degree and extent unknown in most regions of the world. Lay persons are emerging in ways never dreamed possible; they are being empowered for ministry in the Church and for secular ministry. They perform functions previously reserved for priests, and they are creating new ministries within the Church (Barbé, 1987).

In the case of social action, lay leaders typically begin with a project that addresses an urgent need of the community, such as school construction, or water supply. Before long they become aware of the larger realities of national, economic, and political life. Hence, the internal structural change in the Church, empowerment of the laity, has larger social and political implications (Barreiro, 1982).

The Hispanic population in this study was predominantly of Central American origin, and thus the Catholic Church was their primary social institution. They were exposed to the principles of liberation theology and were familiar with the Freirian method of empowerment. In fact, many had helped to organize base Christian communities. These base communities taught them the basic notions of critical consciousness and community social action (Brown, 1990; McGovern, 1989; Chopp, 1986). On this basis, the core principles of liberation theology were selected as the change strategy used to attempt to improve the educational performance and achievement of Hispanic students through community involvement and empowerment.

## **Methods**

This study employed qualitative interview study methods. The goal of this study was to understand the social phenomena of the creation of an educational community center, the empowerment of a disenfranchised community, and ultimately, the educational improvement of Hispanic youth from the perspective of parents. Qualitative methodologies are appropriate to accomplish this in that they “seek direct access to the lived experience of the human actor as he or she understands and deals with ongoing events” (Patton, 1990, p. 391). Qualitative research studies involve a process of inquiry in collecting data of phenomena that are centered on human and behavioral nature (Yin, 1989). We assume that the perspective of respondents is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit; our goal was to share in the meanings that participants take for granted and then to depict the new understanding for the reader and for outsiders (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Another rationale for employing interviews is the uniqueness of the situation to be studied (Seidman, 1991). At present, a Hispanic educational community center does not exist anywhere in the metropolitan area of this study. The educational community center is not only unique for this area, but given the fact that this study takes place in the “Deep South,” it is considered an educational

innovation. Interviews allow us to listen to people as they describe how they understand the worlds in which they live (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

### **Data Sources**

The Oakwood Apartment Complex was the setting for this study. This complex is a federally subsidized housing development for low-income families. The housing complex is made up of 505 family units of which 87% of the families are of Hispanic origin. The apartments are located in a southern suburb 16 miles west of a major metropolitan area. The 1990 U.S. Census showed that 10% of this city's 72,000 residents are Hispanic, making it the most dense Hispanic section in the metropolitan area. The census also indicated that this city and the entire metropolitan area have a heavy concentration of Central Americans. The majority of the Hispanic residents are immigrants from Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, respectively. The Hispanic population at the Oakwood Apartments has the same mixture of Central American residents.

The Oakwood Family Education Center was created with the goal of providing after-school tutorials for at-risk students residing in the Oakwood complex. During the time of this study, the center was open to school age students from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m., Monday through Wednesday, and from 10:00 a.m. to noon on Saturday. Adult English-as-a-second-language classes were also held on Monday and Wednesday evenings. Space for the center was donated by the apartment complex on the top floor of a two-story building that was otherwise vacant. Center staff was comprised of teacher leaders who volunteered to lead tutorials (these were primarily bilingual teachers) and college students from local universities who volunteered to assist. While there was no formal coordination between local schools and the center, teacher leaders and parents provided a conduit of information and helped organize activities so that they reinforced what students were learning at school.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 Hispanic parents who are residents of the Oakwood Apartments. The parents interviewed for this study were selected from each of the following groups:

1. Lay leaders—parents who take an active role in the creation of the center. These are parents who attended the initial meetings as the center was being formed; they are the same parents who knocked on doors and helped to survey the Oakwood community; they take part in registration day activities; and they are the parents who distribute flyers and telephone other parents to attend center events. Six participants make up this group; all six were interviewed.
2. Parents who registered their children, sent them to the center, but were not involved in the creation of the center. These parents can be divided into two groups: (a) parents who come to the center and talk with the teachers and tutors about their children's educational well-being; and (b) parents who rarely come to the center, and when they do, they do not speak with any of the teachers or tutors. A total of 10 parents were interviewed from group two.

Since the participants were selected from 250 families who registered their children at the center, “registered parents” are defined as those parents who attended Registration Day activities one week prior to the beginning of classes.

The majority of the Hispanic families residing in the Oakwood Apartments are recent arrivals to the United States. Most of the families are not yet proficient in English; therefore, the interviews were conducted in Spanish. Participants could better express themselves; the descriptions of their experiences and perspectives were richer and thicker. The interviewer was bilingual (Spanish) and bicultural.

The interview process reflected in-depth interviewing. Such interviewing consisted of open-ended questions that focused on participants’ experiences and perspectives. Seidman (1991) argues that in-depth interviewing is appropriate when the researcher has an interest in understanding the experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. Open-ended questions are used to develop rapport, cooperation, and participation of the respondents while easing apprehension of the interviewees (Spradley, 1979). The researcher began the interviews with broad questions to get into the interview process; the process was then followed by a series of prompts. These prompts were used to probe for in-depth description, elaboration, and clarification of responses.

All participants were contacted by telephone. The interviewer personally called each prospective participant, and in Spanish, they were asked to participate in a study investigating the creation of the Oakwood Education Center. Participants were asked to devote an hour of their time and possibly a subsequent meeting or telephone conversation. It was explained that all of their responses would be kept confidential and insured that they fully understood the purposes of the study. They were also informed that the interviews would be audio recorded, and that the tapes and their names would be kept confidential. Informed consent forms outlined the study and made explicit the right to refuse participation in any aspect of this study. The right to refuse initial participation or leave after the study started was a check against unethical procedures.

### **Results of the Study**

The focus of this study is on the creation of the Oakwood Family Education Center, a community education center in a Hispanic community which seeks to address the educational needs of Hispanic youth. A group of teacher leaders, parents, and community business leaders acted outside of the school system to develop and implement the center using a culturally appropriate model based on the principles of liberation theology. In choosing liberation theology as a model, teacher leaders hoped to see such outcomes as the emergence of lay leaders, a sense of community, and the eventual academic improvement of Hispanic youth.

## Lay Leadership

Prior to the creation of the center, many of the residents expressed concern about the educational well-being of the children in the complex, and they felt that something had to be done about the poor educational attainment of their children. A group of about six parents noted that they would be willing to help in any way possible. Their status as lay leaders derives from their initial willingness to become involved and their continuous efforts. All of the lay leaders were very much aware of the problems in the Oakwood complex.

In group discussions, they all spoke candidly and frankly about a variety of problems in the complex, and they were also aware of the problems on the local and even on the national level. A mother of three brought magazine articles and stated, "Are you all aware that Hispanic students drop out in greater numbers than any other ethnic group?" Another mother stated, "Many of our children do not finish school, and most of these kids eventually get into some type of trouble." One mother was very concerned because she had watched a program on the Spanish channel that dealt with an increase in teen pregnancies among Hispanic girls in the United States. Her comment was, "Teen pregnancy is the responsibility of the parents. The government cannot be responsible for our children." A leader father discussed the issue of gang involvement in the local community. His very vocal comment was, "The local police have asked the churches to help them in the fight to combat gang involvement in our community."

All of the lay leaders had children in school. They were all aware of the importance of education. One father commented, "I want to give my sons a good education because in this country, a good education means a better life in the future." Likewise, another mother said, "A good education will prevent my children from having to clean houses for a living." The general discussion about education always centers around the high dropout rate among Hispanic students. All of the lay leaders agree that this major problem was a community problem and that the community should take some action.

Five of the six lay leaders were women, all of whom considered themselves limited English proficient. This was of great concern to the five women leaders because this lack of English skills prevented them from helping their children with their schoolwork. A leader mother commented, "I cannot speak English well, and because of this I am not able to help my children with their school work." An angry mother said, "My parents gave me the opportunity to study. I was young and did not take advantage of it. Now my children are suffering for it." A single mother said, "I don't attend parent meetings at school because I don't understand what they are saying, and they don't understand me." Four of the five leader mothers also attend the adult evening English classes. A single mother working two jobs said, "I have to learn English so that I can get a better job. The center would have evening classes right in the complex, how could I not get involved?"

The leader mothers were religiously oriented. Involvement in their respective churches helped to give these parents a sense of commitment, but it also sparked in them a spirit of involvement. This one characteristic sets the lay leaders apart from the other 10 participants. "My involvement in my church has given me a personal feeling for the suffering in our community," a vocal mother said.

Besides involvement in church activities, the characteristic most evident in the lay leaders was their close family ties and their strong belief in the family. If it affected the family, it affected them. A leader mother commented, "My family is all I have in this country. Everything I do is because of them." A mother of three children said, "Me and my children are all I have; son mis tesoros (they are my treasures). Everything I do, I do for them." Lay leaders involved themselves in center activities because the center provided them and their families some kind of personal benefit. This particular characteristic was evident in the responses of all of the participants.

Another important characteristic of the lay leaders in this study is the fact that a majority of them are women. The lone male leader commented on this, "In my country, the education of the children is left to the women." Another male participant said, "You have to work hard in this country; my obligation is to put food on the table. My wife takes care of everything else." This definition of roles was so pervasive that in response to questions relative to leadership, the women lay leaders indicated that they did not consider themselves to be leaders. "I do not think that I am a leader. I am just a good mother because I care about my family. Leadership is the role of the *politicos* (politicians). My role is that of a caring mother."

The lay leaders agreed that action must accompany a sense of community. Most of the lay leaders were willing to "take any action necessary to remedy the problem." One of the lay leaders stated, "If I have to, I will knock on every door in the Oakwood and make sure that all of the parents get the message." Another lay leader wanted to picket a local high school when the community heard that Hispanic students were not allowed to speak Spanish in the cafeteria. His demand was heard loud and clear, "We should plant ourselves in front of the principal's office and let her know that the community will not allow this to happen to our children." A very vocal leader said, "If the principal will not hear us, we should petition the school authorities in person." However, two of the leaders stated that the action must be moderate, and always cautioned against taking any form of radical action. One of these mothers warned, "We must remember that this is not our country. The authorities in this country will come down on us if our actions are too radical."

### Sense of Community

As mentioned earlier, the lay leaders exhibited a strong awareness of the needs of the community. However, with the exception of the lay leaders, seven of the ten other participants stated that they were not aware of the problems in the community. One very tired mother said, "I work many hours and I come home very late. When I get home, I close the door, and I am not aware of any

problems outside.” A single mother stated, “I have no husband; I have no one to look after me. I cannot afford to be sticking my nose where it does not belong.” Another mother said, “I work three jobs. I don’t have the time to find out what is happening in the community.”

The poor in Latin America see a sense of community in terms of the family. If it is good for the family, it is good for the community. Yet, even after rewording the questions relative to sense of community to reflect this meaning, participants still had difficulty relating to this concept. One mother stated, “Only the wealthy can afford to help those who are not family.” Another mother said, “I am only aware of the needs of my family. Outside of my family I don’t know very much.” A mother put it very succinctly, “My sense of community starts with family first.” A mother of two stated, “Americans define a sense of community by giving money to an unknown organization. We give money to our family in need.” It is interesting to note that all of the participants, including the lay leaders, responded that “community and family” are considered as one.

Familiasm is an important value in the Hispanic culture and must be considered when dealing with community or community awareness. A question that emerged as this study progressed was, what is the role of family relative to community awareness? During the interviews, all of the participants responded that they involved themselves in community matters only when it affected them or their family members. A lay leader made this observation, “When Hispanics come to this country, we automatically lose our extended family. All we have is each other. The smaller the family nucleus, the closer the family ties.” A mother of two elementary students said, “I may not know very much, but I do know what my family is doing and what is good for my family.”

Thus, while at first glance it would seem that the participants were not in the least aware of their environment or the problems in their community, parents talked openly about the educational needs of their children. They were concerned about their academic improvement. Participation in the creation of the center helped to form a collective activity. These two manifestations of community action helped to enhance community awareness in the Oakwood complex.

The parents in this study support the center because they firmly believe that they or their children will personally benefit from the tutoring and various activities conducted by the center. A mother attending the adult English classes said, “These classes will help me to better understand English. In time I may be able to help my children with school work and maybe get a better job.” A single father responded, “I work late, and now that we have the center, I can send my son to do his homework. I had no one to help me before.” An active couple in the complex stated, “The center is like home, very accessible and a very friendly place to visit.” Fourteen of the sixteen participants interviewed stated, “*La Escuelita es una gran ventaja para nosotros*,” (“The little school is of great benefit to us.”) When asked why the participants referred to the center as “*La Escuelita*,” they overwhelmingly responded that they called it so because it is small, it is like home, it is accessible, and it is a safe place to send their children. (Diminutive endings in

Spanish indicate small in size; they also refer to a quality of being familiarly known, and in many instances they are used as a term of endearment.) The caring and nurturing qualities of the center created a home-like environment. This in turn caused the Hispanic parents in the Oakwood complex to feel that “*La Escuelita*” was a part of the community and, therefore, it could serve as the answer to some of the problems in the community.

Personal benefit initially caused the parents of the Oakwood complex to talk about the poor educational attainment of their children and the need for some type of after-school tutoring. One of the first leaders to emerge commented, “We decided to become involved because as immigrant Hispanic parents we realized that a good education was the only way out for our children. The community had to take some positive action.” Another lay leader stated, “The creation of an education center called for the community to participate in the development of a program that reflected the needs of our community.”

Another important manifestation of community action was the collective activity that was realized in the formation of an after-school tutoring center. Teachers and concerned parents came together to see if such a center could become a reality. A sense of community was evident when many of the parents participated in the activities of the center once it had been created. Again, involvement became the critical element in the enhancement of community awareness.

A lay leader responded, “I became involved when I saw that the little school actually had the potential of becoming a real tutoring center.” A young mother said, “I started to call other mothers when I was told that adult English classes were possible if we could get six adults to register for classes.” Another lay leader stated, “I was skeptical at first, but when I saw the building and met the teachers, I felt that something good could come of this.” The creation of the center also ignited a flurry of activity in the Hispanic community. Hispanic business and professional organizations became involved. In time, “*La Escuelita*” became a household word in the Oakwood complex.

Taken together, these two manifestations of community action may help to answer why the majority of the participants seem to lack a sense of community awareness. The economic, social, and educational burdens on these parents, especially on the single mothers, are too awesome to conceive. While it might seem that the immigrant living in urban and suburban U.S. would have a better quality of life, on closer inspection it appears that they experience a substantial loss in time spent with their families because of the many hours spent in menial employment. Isolation and discrimination are evident, as is the erosion of the nuclear family.

The characteristics of the participants are very similar to those of the members of the base Christian communities referred to in the literature. At the start of the research, it was assumed that the parents in this study would respond much like the rural and urban poor had responded in Brazil and Central America. If these marginalized people had a sense of community awareness, surely the Hispanic parents in the Oakwood complex would be aware of the problems in

their community, and surely they would act on them. However, the differences in context may account for the lack of community awareness. To begin, the base Christian communities start and prosper in rural areas; these areas usually have small populations and family ties are very close. In the rural area there is some property ownership; small parcels of farmland are owned and worked. The residents of the Oakwood complex are all renters so there is no tie to the land. An Oakwood father said, "Owning your own home or some property is important. Our children have no roots. Some day I hope to buy a house; we need to have a place to call our own." The extended family back home provides economic and social support; in America, the nuclear family stands alone. In fact, the nuclear family is slowly eroding; the number of single-parent families is growing annually. In Central America, there is a sense of belonging. In the suburbs of America, most immigrant residents do not feel wanted.

Another reason for this possible lack of community awareness is the belief of most Central American immigrants that their stay of residence in America is only temporary. All of the participants in this study return to their homeland annually. Proximity to all of the countries in Central America and low airfares allow the Oakwood parents to visit their homelands frequently. A single mother said, "I work very hard so that in the summer I and my children can go back home to visit my family." A father stated, "Each summer I try to go back home, and if I cannot make it, I at least try to send my family."

Looking at a sense of community from the context in which the participants live sheds some light as to why the respondents in this study seem not to be aware of the needs and wants of their community. The social, economic, and educational instability of these parents in the United States almost forces them to cling to the nuclear family. It is no wonder that the family plays such a central role in the daily lives of these parents. Their family is their community because they do not or cannot venture out into the larger community. Community awareness or participation can be observed only if it affects the family.

#### Academic Improvement

From the responses of the participants, it was clear that homework is considered to be central to the academic improvement of their children. In fact, in all 16 interviews, participants responded that their main concern had to do with their children "doing homework and doing it well." The participants in this study live in subsidized housing; seven of the sixteen participants are single parents; and with the exception of two English-speaking parents, only two of the Hispanic parents consider themselves somewhat proficient in the English language. Given these personal characteristics, all of the parents in this study had a genuine concern for the educational well-being of their children. For example, a mother who had immigrated from Honduras and has two elementary children who attend the center said, "I came to this country so that my children could have a better life, and the only thing that I can give them to attain this is a good education. I want my daughters to have a good

education so they will not have to do domestic work or work in factories . . . this is a grand country, but you need an education to have a good life.”

Homework seems to be the one aspect of education where the participants hope to have some control or say-so. Seven of the sixteen respondents stated that, “completion of homework assignments, and doing these assignments correctly, is the foundation for acquiring a good education.” However, 14 of the 16 participants said that their lack of English proficiency and limited educational attainment prohibited them from effectively helping their children. A mother said, “I don’t know English well enough to help my children with their homework, so I send them to the center so that the teachers can help them.” The dichotomy between knowing what is good for the education of their children, and not being able to help them effectively with their homework assignments, seems to be the crux of this matter. Respondents were then asked a series of questions concerning the creation of the center, the effect the center has had on homework assignments, how homework was done before the center opened, and the impact of the center and its staff on the educational improvement of their children.

Parents indicated that there are four outcomes concerning the academic improvement of Hispanic youth that are directly linked to homework: improved grades, discipline, attitude, and self-confidence. One parent put it this way: “Academic improvement is like a beautifully wrapped package with homework as the prize; the box, the wrapping, and the bow all enhance what is inside.” All of the participants acknowledged that prior to the creation of the center, homework assignments were almost never completed, and the frustration level of the parents increased. Desperation on the part of the parents was likewise heightened because of their low level of educational attainment and because of their limited English proficiency.

As a result of “doing homework,” all 16 participants saw some improvement in grades. Frequent attendance at the center helped students improve their reading, vocabulary, and mathematics skills. A single mother commented that, “I work late hours and before the center was in operation, my son would not do his homework because he did not understand it or he just did not do it because there was no adult to help him do it.” The majority of the parents stated that reading skills had definitely improved; “The teachers at the center all speak English without an accent, the students hear the right pronunciation and this helps them to speak better and to read better,” several parents commented. Grades in mathematics also improved; many of the participants stated that they “had not finished school” or “I don’t understand math problems because of my limited education.”

Seven of the sixteen participants, all single mothers, stated that “doing homework” on a daily basis gives their children a sense of discipline. One mother said, “they get off the bus, they come straight home, they get something to eat, and they go to the center to do their homework.” Another mother commented, “The children are not allowed to go to the center without their books, notebooks, and homework assignments . . . This gives them a sense of order.”

All of the parents work. All of the single mothers hold down at least two jobs, and in two households, these mothers work a third job on the weekends. The loss of the "extended family" has greatly affected the Hispanic community. Economic survival takes priority over many facets of family life. Order and discipline are in demand. One parent stated, "without discipline you cannot grow up to be a productive adult." A mother of two children said, "The staff at the center are firm, the children are not allowed to fight, nor are they allowed to use vulgar language."

Male members of the staff often serve as role models for some of the absent fathers. Three of the single mothers commented that, "children who behave themselves, those who get good grades, and those who attend the center on a regular basis are rewarded by being allowed to go on field trips." Prior to the creation of the center, mothers commented that, "many of the children in the neighborhood just stood on street corners and did nothing." Another mother stated, "Now the center has given them order and discipline . . . they do their homework instead of just hanging out."

According to the responses in the study, "doing homework" is also an important key in the change of attitude toward school. Fourteen of sixteen participants responded that their children experienced a change in attitude toward school since attending the center. For example, one parent stated, "Now my daughter likes to go to school because she completes her homework assignments." Another parent said, "Before attending the center my daughter did not finish her homework because I could not help her with it, now when she has difficult homework, I send her to the center, there they help her and she turns in a completed assignment. She likes going to school when her homework is completed and done right." A father responded, "My son would not do his homework because I did not understand his assignment or I could not take him to the library when he needed certain materials." Students do not turn in projects, teachers take off points, students are suspended, and after a while, students do not want to go to school.

Along with a change in attitude, all of the participants responded, "*tiene mas confianza*" (He/she has more confidence). "My child is more confident because she is now able to complete her homework, and she feels good about herself, so now she wants to go to school. Before, she would make any excuse not to go to school because she was afraid of her teachers." This response rang throughout the 16 interviews:

Jimmy is a good boy, but before the center, I would have to go to his school and speak with his teachers because he was getting poor grades. He was not doing his homework, and his teachers complained of his lack of self-confidence. In fact, they even talked about special education for him. I said no! Now you see him at the center every day, his grades have improved. He now has more confidence in himself, because his homework has improved and he no longer has trouble with his teachers.

Beyond these findings related directly to homework, respondents also felt that their children's academic improvement was related to the caring and

nurturing environment created by the center. "Jesse loves to go to the center because everyone there cares about him," comments a single mother. Another mother responds, "My daughters enjoy going to the center because no one discriminates against them." A working mother states, "My heart is at peace because when my children are at the center, I know that they are in a safe and secure environment." Other comments state, "The teachers really care about the children. On one occasion, a teacher went on vacation and sent my children a post card." One appreciative mother said, "The teachers are constantly writing me notes about my son's progress or I may get a note letting me know that he did not get the chance to finish his homework and they let me know what I must do to help him." Another mother stated, "My children are happy when they go to the center because the center wants them to be successful."

### **Discussion**

The central question posed in this study was whether the creation of the Oakwood center fostered the emergence and development of lay leaders, a greater sense of community awareness, and educational improvement among Hispanic youth. To fully appreciate and understand the findings, it is necessary to rethink the efficacy of the assumption that liberation theology is culturally appropriate for Central American Hispanic immigrants, and to examine the question of whether what actually emerged was consistent with Freire's model.

This study confirms the influence of the Church on this population of participants. All of the lay leaders were active in their respective churches. The leadership skills and grass roots organizing acquired in church activities were put in effect during the creation phase of the center. Contrary to expectations suggested by liberation theology, it does not appear that the creation of the center was instrumental in the development of lay leadership; rather, the data suggest that when the opportunity to become involved in the center presented itself, parents with leadership skills and abilities self-selected themselves as volunteers and activated their community leadership in the center.

The results of this study also indicate that several factors were associated with the activation of lay leadership. First, the educational attainment of the participants had an effect on involvement and participation. Even small increases in the number of years of schooling had an effect on the participation of the respondents. The lay leaders had two or three years more of school than the rest of the participants. This additional education gave them a sense of pride.

Overall there was a predominance of women participants. Twelve of the sixteen participants were women, and five of six lay leaders were also women. A result worth noting is the fact that all five of the women lay leaders did not see themselves as "leaders." These women saw themselves as "good mothers." They stated that they did not have the skills or education to be considered as "leaders." Clawson (1997) argues that, "Hispanic men and women demonstrate that they are good at being men or women through gender-based behaviors that bring personal honor" (p. 162). The one male leader and the other three

male participants saw themselves as “providers” and stated that the education of the children was the women’s/wife’s obligation. In the Hispanic tradition women are the preservers of the family. Their domain is in *la casa*, “the home.” “It is there (la casa) that the woman rears and teaches her children and fulfills her divinely appointed role as homemaker” (p. 163).

This study suggests that family and personal benefit are the motivating forces behind all of the respondents’ involved activity, including the lay leaders. Hispanics, regardless of their national origins, report a strong commitment to family (Nieto, 1992). Hispanic literature on family is framed by the term of familism, the behavioral manifestations of Hispanics that reflect strong emotional and value commitments to family life. All of the participants in this study stated, “My family is my community.” Community and family are seen as one. The participants did everything in the name of family; the respondents in this study gave and received a high level of family support and desired geographical closeness to their families (Keefe & Padilla, 1987). The bonds of family loyalty are so strong that in many instances, this loyalty may exceed their loyalty to the community (Aptekar, 1988).

Results also reinforce the value placed on family by all of the participants; community activists and service providers working with this population should not underestimate the value of family in every facet of their activity. The Central American participants in this study bring with them a culture, which is not analogous to the culture of Mexico, Cuba, or Puerto Rico. There are important differences in the cultural, political, religious, and social structure of these Central American groups (Cordoba, 1986). The literature on Hispanic families states that it is important to preserve this strong sense of family because it helps to reduce delinquency and drug use in the community (Ramos & Nieto, 1991).

Analysis further suggests that for most parents, the decision about whether to lead or follow is a pragmatic one. Whereas traditional concepts of liberation theology stress empowerment through community involvement, this connection appears here to be mediated by the desire of participants to succeed in mainstream American (suburban) society. They are being more pragmatic than “liberated;” for them, empowerment means learning how to succeed within the system. The lay leaders, like other participants, became involved primarily because of family and personal benefit. That is, the lay leaders did not become active participants in community affairs until the creation of the center was a reality. The six lay leaders were already active in their respective churches and had the requisite leadership skills; however, it was the creation of the center and the benefit that the center could bring to their families that caused them to become active.

In terms of whether the emergence of the center brought about an enhanced sense of community awareness, the data reveal certain surprises. In fact, we might conclude that an Americanized version of this portion of the Freire model emerged. In analyzing the data on sense of community, it appeared that the non-leader participants seemed to lack a sense of community needs or problems. These participants were too busy with their daily preoccupations

to worry about problems in their community. A comparison of lifestyles in Central America and the newly acquired lifestyles of the participants indicated that the social, economic, and educational pressures placed on individuals in America had taken their toll on the Oakwood parents. It should be noted, however, that the value of family was not lost in the transition. If anything, the concern for family was even stronger. The pressures of American life caused the participants to involve themselves only in activities that benefitted them or members of their family. Their sense of community awareness became more individualized than liberation theology would predict; participation in center activities increased their sense of awareness of the educational needs of Hispanic youth, but they participated only when they saw some benefit to their children.

In terms of whether the activities of the center impact on the educational attainment of Hispanic youth, data suggest that the creation of the center did bring about the academic improvement of the Hispanic students attending the center. The Oakwood Family Education Center is primarily an after-school tutoring center. The participants considered “doing homework and doing it well” as central to the academic improvement of their children. Homework was one area where the parents had some control; that is, it was that area of their child’s schooling that was supposed to occur with the support of parents. Because of their limited English proficiency, though, parents felt frustrated and were grateful when the teachers decided to open the center.

One of the more interesting outcomes revealed in the data is the subtlety and complexity of the educational improvement model suggested by the group of parents. These parents had a school improvement model in their heads, which they articulated in interviews, with homework as the central issue affecting student success at school. Homework, they felt, was linked to improved grades, discipline, self-confidence, and change in attitudes toward school. In fact, the literature supports these assumptions; for instance, Ramos and Nieto (1991) discovered that not liking to do homework was one major reason for the high Hispanic dropout rate. The Oakwood parents were astute enough to realize that homework was central to many factors that contributed to academic improvement.

Doing homework had an impact on grades. Most parents realized this immediately when their children came home with completed homework checks. Parents stated that reading and mathematics improved, and proof of this was evident in improved grades on the nine weeks report cards. Discipline at home and at school improved because by completing homework assignments, students felt good about themselves and they wanted to go to school. Hanging around the apartment complex was reduced because students were now doing homework in the center. Fighting in the complex was also reduced because the students were now using their time more productively. Finally, a change in attitude toward school and an increase in self-confidence were brought about because completed homework assignments brought better grades, and better grades proved to these students that they could also succeed in the academic environment.

It should also be noted that, despite the fact that in many ways residents of the Oakwood complex are marginalized, the parents interviewed did not tend to blame the school system for the problems associated with their children's education. In fact, just the opposite appeared to be true; they seemed to embrace an opportunity to become personally involved in a mechanism that could help improve their children's performance and achievement at school. Those who had leadership skills tended to become actively involved in the creation and operation of the center, and others took advantage of center services.

In summary, the primary lesson for educators from this study is that Hispanic parents may be more than willing to become active participants in educational improvements, provided that appropriate opportunities are created. In the present case, the creation of the center was considered such an opportunity because members of the community were involved from the outset in its development, because it was located within the community, and because it directly addressed needs identified by the community. From a policy perspective, this suggests that school systems need to take steps to provide parents of traditionally "at-risk" students opportunities to be involved in meaningful ways. This may include community-based learning centers like "*La Escuelita*," where students have the personal space to do their homework and receive extra help. It also suggests that school systems should use culturally-appropriate strategies that take advantage of alliances with existing participatory structures, in this case the church, and that schools may expect leaders from within the community to play an active role in sustaining change that meaningfully affects their family's well-being.

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### **Appendix A**

#### Lay leaders—parents actively involved in creation of the center

1. Tell me the story of your involvement with the center.
2. How did you first hear about the center?
3. What led you to get actively involved with the center?
4. Describe specifically how you are involved in the center.
  - a. What do you do?
  - b. What have you done?
5. Describe what happens at meetings.
  - a. What things are discussed?
  - b. How are decisions made?
  - c. Give me some specific examples (walk me through an example).
  - d. How were you personally involved in this example or decision?
6. What type of communication do you have with other parents in the complex?

#### Parents whose child comes to the center

1. How do you define “sense of community”?
  - a. What does it mean to you?
2. How would you describe the “sense of community” in the Oakwood housing complex?

- a. How did the center impact your “sense of community”?
3. What are the problems in the Hispanic community?
  - a. How did the center (if at all) make you aware of these problems?
4. Tell me about your child’s involvement in the center.
  - a. How often does your child attend the center?
  - b. What does your child tell you about the center and its activities?
  - c. What does your child do at the center?
  - d. Does your child like attending the center? Why or why not?
5. How has your involvement in the center affected your child’s homework habits?
  - a. What did your child do before the center opened?
  - b. What is he/she doing now?
6. What impact, if any, has the center had on your child’s academic performance relative to grades, turning in homework, tests, and reports?
  - a. What was your child’s academic performance before the center?
  - b. What was your child’s academic performance after attending the center?
7. What impact, if any, has the center had on your child’s attitude towards school?
  - a. What was your child’s attitude before attending the center?
  - b. What was your child’s attitude after attending the center?
8. What outcomes, if any, do you think the center has had on the local Hispanic community and on the local public school system?

