

Responses to the Presentation by Gloria Rodriguez

After presenting her paper, Gloria Rodriguez answered questions from symposium participants. A panel then convened to respond to her presentation.

Questions and Comments from Participants Responding to Gloria Rodriguez's Presentation

Participant: Could you explain a little more about the chapter system of AVANCE?

Gloria Rodriguez: We have a national headquarters and then individual chapters in other locations. Each chapter has a local board of directors, but each chapter must meet the standards—a checklist including finance and other programmatic standards—of AVANCE. They are allowed some flexibility to adjust the program to their community, but within our guidelines and standards.

Participant: I understand that AVANCE uses a structured curriculum. Could you explain a little more about your curriculum and why you have chosen a structured approach?

Gloria Rodriguez: Yes, we do use a structured approach that we have worked to build over many years and, after reviewing research, with our parents. We don't ask parents to come and then say, "Learn what you want," because many of the families come to us not knowing where they should start. Our approach includes working in the parent group on predesigned activities, in the classroom settings, and also in the home.

People come to the program knowing what we expect—there are desks, they raise their hands to ask questions, they can't smoke or bring firearms. Once the parent goes through the program, then he or she is ready to move on to another level, such as community college. That is partly because although the program is structured, it is also nurturing. We believe that with the right support, you can make progress.

Panel Session—Responding to the AVANCE Experience and the Question “What Should Be Done to Help Hard-to-Reach Parents Get Ready for School?”

Moderator: Jean Paine Mendoza, University of Illinois

Low audio quality prevented full transcription of the panel session. The themes that were addressed during the discussion are summarized below.

1. *The need to acknowledge that perhaps the right question is “How do we get schools ready for hard-to-reach parents?”*

Understanding how schools should prepare for parents and students seems to be the more respectful way of looking at this issue. Then we can ask, “How do we change infrastructures and bureaucracies that are not conducive to providing parent support?”

One way is to bring people—parents and teachers—together to build formal and informal relationships in a variety of settings. Parents often interpret school-related terminology as a personal attack on them. If school personnel begin early by forming groups of parents and school staff who have regular conversations about a variety of topics, then parents won’t view school personnel as potentially threatening and will be more receptive to, for example, early literacy-related concepts.

School personnel should also be creative in developing ways to engage parents and eventually develop a “parent-driven” model. For example, in one school, a regular Saturday morning play day and cookout was most effective with involving fathers.

2. *The need to clarify effective methods of communication.*

It is important to understand the actual goals of the communication and then take the information to where it is accessible to the parents such as the church, the grocery store, clinics and hospitals, or other places that parents frequent. In communities where neighbor-to-neighbor conversation is a primary source of information, it is helpful to develop verbal ways of sharing information. Programs could provide a multidimensional platform where folks have a variety of ways and opportunities to share information and work together. Television is a medium that reaches most parents, and even though it is expensive, it should not be ruled out as a possibility.

3. *The need to identify what are sustainable models for programs and how to create them.*

Sometimes program guidelines get in the way of really serving families and maintaining the program. Programs should have a set of principles, a leadership base, and structure (for example, a business model) that will ensure its

continuity in the community for as long as the program is needed. Establishing trust and long-term relationships with the families in the community is critical. One of the reasons that the Reggio model is so successful is because children and families are approached respectfully with an understanding that there will be long-term relationships.

If the program guidelines are flexible enough to adjust to the changing needs of parents and families, participation is more likely to be sustainable. Although it is obvious that we want to look at programs that are working, it is also important to look critically at the ones that are not working, even if it sets a negative frame. Understanding the barriers to a program's successful implementation will help improve outcomes over the long run.

4. The need to define what is meant by “vulnerable” without being disrespectful of families but still acknowledging that there are inequalities.

All too frequently, politicians and educators are making decisions about who is “vulnerable” or “at risk.” Parents should be included in the conversation about what is meant by vulnerable children and families. Including parents in the conversation will help reduce the possibility of seeing vulnerable parents as “those” parents, or of seeing the problems or issues of vulnerable families as so separate from the problems of others. Individuals who are given the responsibility as educators to prepare parents may not know the intricacies and protocol that are important within the culture that they are serving. Sometimes there are dual goals in terms of the skills that the parents and their community expect for their children and what the educator may expect. When educators understand the goals of the parents and larger community, it may then be possible to integrate expectations, thereby reducing vulnerability.