

## ***Working with immigrant and refugee families: broadening cross-cultural understanding with immigrant/refugee families***

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**Abstract:** Parent engagement programs are in high demand these days, particularly as they pertain to immigrant and refugee families. But working with families entails purposeful communication with families (Valdés, 1996). Yet, often families are caught in cross-cultural divides that forces them out of engagement with those running the program (Machado-Casas, 2012). Cultural disconnections often times become ways in which minority families find themselves trapped (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Some researchers have looked at non-traditional pedagogical spaces to challenge future and practicing educators and community members to examine how the process of normalization privileges dominant groups while simultaneously oppressing 'others' (Cary, 2006). When this happens the process of «pimping families» through discourses that «talk» at them rather than to/for them lead to furthering hegemonic practices often aimed at minority families. Through interviews with families, and educators, this paper will highlight the «cultural confessions» of educators, and families who utilize non-traditional spaces to expose how prejudice and privilege have influenced their perceptions of «legitimate knowledge», legitimate spaces, and legitimate cross-cultural communication. This paper will present data obtained from Communities United for Education (CUPE) a family involvement

and education program that nurtures a strong sense of community among students, teachers, and families. The program focuses in the empowering of families through developing support, leadership, advocacy, and activism, in addition to working with parents on bridging the digital divide among family members. Data presented will expose how families have educators have experienced and dealt with cross-cultural communication issues.

**Keywords:** family engagement; empowerment; families; parent participation; refugees; immigrants.

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## 1. Introduction

Engagement of family programs are on high demand in the United States and across the world. They are now part of the required budget for schools. Making family engagement identifiable and of high need, particularly as they pertain to immigrant and refugee families. But working with families entails purposeful communication with families (Valdés, 1996), not merely talking at them. Yet, often families are caught in cross-cultural divides that forces them out of engagement with those running the program (Machado-Casas, 2012). Cultural disconnections often times become ways in which minority families find themselves trapped (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Some researchers have looked at non-traditional pedagogical spaces to challenge future and practicing educators and community members to examine how the process of normalization privileges dominant groups while simultaneously oppressing «others» (Cary, 2006). Traditional aspects of parental family involvement are defined through different types of volunteer activities including: sporting events, Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), fundraisers, etc., (Hidalgo, 1998) describes notions of parental involvement as being scripted and performed and argues that in parents must understand the structures of schooling in order to navigate through these systems. The seminal work of Delgado-Gaitán (1994) and Valdés (1996) and Bernal (2002) has shown that parental involvement for Latino families is often done in ways that do not align with these traditional schooling expectations. Delgado-Gaitán's work highlights the emphasis Latino families take in preparing their children to be successful members of society and duly notes that often times given their different upbringing, these notions of parental involvement are aspects of schooling that Lati@ parents are not accustomed to. Valdez (1996) suggest that through creating bridges between school and home in ways that value familial knowledge Lati@ students can be successful in the United States. Bernal (2002) explains how students of color should be viewed as holders and creators of knowledge. These narratives serve as the overarching framework of this work. Students of color from Latino families have cultural and familial wealth. Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2006) defined this positivistic view of what parents bring to the table as funds of knowledge. Yosso (2005) theory on community cultural wealth shifts the focus from negative perceptions of students of color and instead chooses to view the forms of knowledge they possess as resourceful. Community cultural wealth can come from many different aspects of their lives including: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Yosso

argues that through these forms of capital Communities of Color have learned to resist oppressive practices of schooling and be successful. Through Yosso's lens we engage in the redefinition of family involvement and argue for family engagement as parents can be involved, but not engaged due to obstacles and barriers they encounter including language, resources, and non-familiarity with traditional notions of parental involvement. We are engaging in the notion of trained awareness to become agents of change and transformation through teacher education. In order to bring the puppeteer to selfcheck and move from a deficit point of view to a positive and holistic one. Programs currently available at schools typically involve engagement through after school (non-formal) programs which vary depending on the school district. Therefore, looking at parental/family involvement during afterschool programs is critical. The next sections will address some of the issues involving Latino and refugee families as it pertains to afterschool programs.

## **2. Latino and refugee parental involvement in afterschool programs**

In a study conducted by Duran (2001), the researchers assessed an after-school technology program for low-income Latino immigrant families. The assessment areas were computer awareness, computer basics, basic word processing skills, multi-media and telecommunications familiarity. Latino parents involved in the program showed significant gains in every area of assessment over the course of the project. Gains were greatest with regard to knowledge of the internet in the area of multimedia and telecommunications familiarity. In contrast, no gains were found in the area of downloading files from the internet and how to use bookmarks to store web page addresses. For those parents involved in this program, computer literacy rose from 32% to 73%.

The interaction between Latino parents and their children in this program was instrumental in acquiring computer literacy. As parents and children wrote together using computers, they engaged in focused problem solving about language content, language organization, and language form as mediated by the computer and its software. Further, through working together with their children, parents began to show evidence that they understood that desktop publishing was central to their communication via computers. By exchanging the role of expert and novice, parents and children were able to explore a range of dimensions relevant to literacy and literacy practice (Duran, 2001).

Overall, the study conducted by Duran (2001) determined that after-school computer learning for immigrant Latino parents and children is beneficial as it interconnects family members, teachers, university students and faculty, and others from the community. Similarly, Valdés (1996) suggested that Latino immigrant families may benefit from exposure to school personnel who might be able to assist parents in understanding schooling practices and expectations. Involvement in after-school technology programs would allow Latino parents such exposure. Finally, after school programs help familiarize parents with the use of computers and information technology by utilizing children's knowledge of computers and information technology (Duran, 2001).

As part of a pilot program for after-school learning called Learning Together, three university professors and teacher educators recruited seven elementary school students and their parents. The participants were low-income families of various ethnic backgrounds including Latinos. The aim of the program was to improve literacy and technology skills. Parents involved in this program committed to actively engage in the literacy programs with their children. Parent involvement was a requirement of this program as research consistently shows that parent involvement enhances student learning. Results of the program indicated student perceptions of increased self-efficacy concerning their computer skills. All students also reported being excited to be able to work independently on the computers and experiment with new programs (Tartakov *et al.*, 2005).

There is a large body of evidence that suggests benefits for teachers and instruction when they are knowledgeable of the linguistic and cultural strengths of their students (e.g., Bartolomé & Leistyna, 2006; Gunderson & Siegel, 2001). When teachers lack the appropriate cultural and linguistic awareness of the communities they will serve, there is a devastating effect on the learners. The literature on diversity preparation report varying degrees of success with pre-service teachers and issues of multicultural education (e.g., language diversity, cultural diversity) (Burant, 1999; Burstein & Cabello, 1989; Gutierrez-Gomez, 2002; Mcallister & Irvine, 2002). Burstein and Cabello (1989, p. 9) argued that: «Teachers, as others, frequently try to achieve a “cultural fit” that is, they try to fit students into their own cultural system». Even when teachers are of the same ethnicity as their students, they may be unaware of their language or cultural ideologies (cf. Dee & Henkin, 2002; Flores & Smith, 2008; Flores, 2001). As Flores and Smith (2008) found, all teachers, of any ethnic background, must engage in critical reflective practices that explore their preconceived notions about language minority children and their communities. Lack of knowledge of the language and literacy practices found in culturally and linguistically diverse communities contributes to this problem.

### **3. Home and school language and literacy divide**

A promising body of research has centered on the importance of home and community educational experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students that can inform schools. Such research highlights the rich language and literacy learning that takes place in homes, churches, and other community spaces (Baqedano-Lopez, 1997; Ek, 2005; Gonzalez, *et al.*, 2005; Vasquez *et al.*, 1994; Zentella, 2005). In addition, some of this research illuminates the stark contrasts between students' out-of-school and in-school engagement arguing that for some students, home and community literacies are much more productive than school practices that fail to engage them to the detriment of their learning and development (McMillon & Edwards, 2000). For example, specifically focusing on the differences between church and school environments, McMillon and Edwards (2000) found that an African-American child was a «superstar» at church whereas in his pre-school his behavior was socially unacceptable. At church the child engaged in language and literacy practices that were not shared by his preschool. Within the last twenty years, researchers have focused on the learning and development of culturally and

linguistically diverse students in out-of-school settings and have found that kids accomplish a great deal in these settings that contrast with their underperformance in the formal school (Hull & Schultz, 2001). Of import to these studies has been a focus on a multiplicity of literacies that are enacted in various sites including technology, popular culture, cultural objects. In particular, work in the New Literacy Studies movement informs our study.

#### 4. Methodology

This paper uses data from a larger research study with 230 participants on the migration, mobility, and survival of Latina/os and ILIs within the New Latino Diaspora in the South (Machado-Casas, 2006). Because this research study focuses on ILI parents and their families (subordinated groups either absent from or misrepresented in historical accounts), narrative research methods (Merriam, 1998) were coupled with multiple interactive methods (Creswell, 2003) for data collection across multiple settings. Clandinin and Huber (2002, p. 20) state that by «understanding ourselves and our worlds narratively, our attention is turned to how we engage in living, telling, retelling, and reliving our lives within particular social and cultural plotlines». Therefore, open-ended interviews were used to understand participant experiences. Narrative research is especially appropriate for this type of study because often, ILI communities are not represented in writing; instead, they have a long history of oral communication. This study also builds on research related to Mexican indigenous migrants (Fox, 2006), second-generation immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), differences between culturally diverse families and schools (Valdés, 1996), Mexican migration (Durand & Massey, 1992) and Latino immigrant transnationality (Trueba, 2004).

Monthly meetings with Latino immigrant parents were held at six urban schools in North Carolina over a period of 3 years. Extensive observational field notes were utilized to document these events. There were between 20 and 30 participants in attendance at each meeting, with a total of 230 ILI parents in the study. Of these, roughly 60 % had indigenous heritages. Many ILI communities are not receptive to outsiders; therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted with just 30 participants whose countries of origin (México, El Salvador and Guatemala) were representative of the three largest groups in the study sample. All 30 participants had children who were enrolled in school at the time of the interview.

Participants were interviewed in Spanish at «safe» locations chosen by the participants. These included, but were not limited to: libraries, stores, restaurants, homes, and other public spaces conducive to open dialogue. Interviews lasted approximately 2–3 h and were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Some indigenous participants had *traductores ocultos* (hidden translators) who assisted them when they experienced difficulties expressing a word or thought in Spanish. Here, «hidden» refers to the translators' sole purpose, which was to assist with vocabulary when necessary; they did not augment or interpret questions or responses. As suggested by Gandara (1995), participants were asked to tell their life stories, including life experiences and educational histories in their countries of origin, their migrations to

the United States, experiences with the US educational system, and how living in the United States has impacted their cultural, linguistic, and social identities.

## 5. Study participants

In the larger 230-person study, written and verbal surveys were used to collect data related to country of origin, language spoken, and nationality. Participants came from Mexico (65 %), El Salvador (20 %), Guatemala (8 %), Honduras (5 %), other Central American countries (1 %) and the South American countries of Peru, Venezuela and Colombia (1 %). Indigenous communities identified in the study included those from Mexico (Otomí, Náhuatl, Maya, Zapoteco, Mixteco, and Tzotzil), El Salvador (Pipil, an almost extinct population), and Guatemala (Quiché and Kaqchikel), among others. Overall, there were over 17 indigenous languages spoken by those who participated in the monthly meetings. In terms of education in their countries of origin, 55 % reported at least some formal education (30 % K-12, 25 % higher education) and 45 % reported no formal education. For the purposes of this paper, the experiences of three participants are used to illustrate common themes among those interviewed. These three were selected based on strong rapport during the interviews and the detailed, highly-personalized nature of their responses. Iza is an indigenous Otomí woman from La Sierra Puebla in México. She is married, has two children and had been in the US for about 6 years at the time of the interview. Iza has worked for her entire life; she began working when she was only a child. She believes she went to school up to second grade, but she is not sure. Maria is a Quiché woman from Guatemala who had been in the US for about 7 years at the time of the interview. She is married and has two children in the US and one in Guatemala. She attended school in Guatemala but did not indicate the grade level. Manuel is a Náhuatl/Pipil from El Salvador, is married and has two children. He had been in the US for about 5 years at the time of the interview and he had attended some school but did not indicate a grade level.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. *Disconnection with schools*

«The inability of current parent involvement policy and practice to take into account contradictions and tensions in knowledge, culture, and power, particularly in regard to bicultural parents, has contributed greatly to the alienation of these communities from the schooling process» (Olivos, 2011). Deficit perceptions on family engagement are usually one of the first arguments and the culprit educators and school administrators have for explaining children's academic success or a lack thereof. Historically, Spanish speaking children and their families have been continuously labeled by public schools with indicators that position them as «at risk», «limited» and «linguistic minorities» as ways for categorizing bilingual students (Wiese & García, 2001). Valdés (1996) and Olsen (1997) both conducted work that is critical to understanding the experience of students who enter into schools with

limited to no English speaking abilities. These studies conclude that overall, Hispanic immigrant students and their families are positioned in deficit ways in regards to their culture and language. These seminal pieces highlight the disconnect immigrant students and their families have experienced in the United States.

Current research shows that from the teachers and school administrators' perspective, a more in-depth understanding of the type and nature of minority parental involvement and how they view education can go a long way in building a more effective partnership between home and school (Valdés, 1996). Teacher's perceptions about the type and efficacy of minority parents' education philosophies and the perceptions about the effectiveness of the parent involvement can be tough barriers when building a strong partnership between schools and home (Chavkin & Williams, 1993). According to Weiss, Caspe and Lopez (2006) children often spend the majority of their time between school and home. School friendliness and positive communication along with open and receptive school policies and parental involvement programs are some of the aspects of a good and effective partnership working together to the success of the Latino student.

## 6.2. *What is Family engagement?*

This paper describes the difference between family involvement and family engagement and illustrates the shift needed to happen from the educator and school administrators' perspectives. Using a strengths-based approach nestled in the Latino Critical thinking theories where families are viewed with a lens to explore how race, racism and socioeconomic status have influenced their experiences as students of color. LatCrit as a branch of CRT is used to explore how teachers' beliefs and expectations contribute to the oppression and deficit views of the Latino family engagement thus shaping the experiences of Latinx education journey. According to current research Family engagement is often considered a key factor on children's participation and success in school. This article focuses on the obstacles to Latino family engagement and the effect educators' preconceived notions have when developing successful home-school partnerships. Oftentimes educators working with Latino families from working-class populations express their surprise and discomfort with poor perceived parental involvement from the Latino parents. Findings in a study by Poza, Brooks and Valdes (2014) highlight the importance of understanding the Latino families' cultural ways. They concluded that Latino families often do engage in many of the parental involvement strategies educators come to expect from their more mainstream populations but Latino families often do it through venues that bypass the school itself. Latino families may have a low visibility on the school, due to language barriers and time constraints. Latino families from working-class can have relatively little presence at school, school events and even less face-to-face proactive interactions with their children's teachers and school administrators (Poza *et al.*, 2014). Teachers may feel that parents' lack the desire to be involved and engaged in their children educational journey. This lack of understanding in educational and cultural attitudes and behaviors can affect how educators perceived the families of their Latino children. Researchers Quiñones and Kiyama (2014) explain how this cultural and educational dissonance between teachers' expectations and

parents' perceptions could have a negative effect on the home-school partnership and could affect the Latino children's school success (Constantino, 2008). According to research, family engagement and family involvement are two separate notions. Families can be involved but not engaged (Quinones & Kiyama, 2014). We start from the idea that often Latino families are involved in their children's education and well-being. Given the opportunity, Latino parents are eager to help their children succeed at school (Gándara, 2010) and look forward to have a better educational future for their children (Halgunseth & Peterson, 2009; Baird, 2015). Family Engagement is strength-based, emphasizes reciprocity and a true partnership between educators, school programs and families at home. Family engagement has a more active meaning and a more effective and participatory tone. This research explores the use of family engagement as a more inclusive term that is better fit for 21<sup>st</sup> century families. In order for families to be effectively engaged in their children's school education they have to participate in meaningful ways in partnership with educators and school administrators (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Pedagogy of the puppet recognizes the cultural and educational constraints teachers may face when partnering with Latino families and look to move from a deficit perception views that defines parent involvement as inadequate, non-existent or lacking and in need of change (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006; Chrispeels, Wang & Rivero, 2000; Poza, Brooks & Valdes, 2014) to family engagement philosophy and attitudes that could be conducing to a more effective and holistic experience for the Latino children and their educational journey. Baird (2015) presents a counterstory narrative to the Latino parent involvement deficit view. Research reviewed focus on the relationship between families and schools revealing that oftentimes EL families are involved in very dynamic processes. These processes may not ascribe to the culturally-lacking beliefs and expectations from the educators and school administrators not familiar or culturally aware of their population. These relationships and dynamic processes «Exist along a continuum from school-directed to parent-led» (Baird, 2015, p. 153) highlighting a clear relationship between the academic success of children from schools where there is a strong and healthy relationship between the type and philosophy of schools programs and the effectiveness of their family partnerships. In this way, there are two findings that will be address 1) Puppetry pedagogies and 2) the empowered puppeteer which are address on the next sections.

### 6.3. *Puppetry pedagogies*

Findings of this study reveal the controlled manipulation by 21<sup>st</sup> century colonizers who work for schools and school districts which these families' children attended. These finding explore how schools, the puppeteers, have full control in both covert and overt ways (feel absolved, permission, savior mentality) over Latino parents. Such behaviors are exhibited through the access to the discourse of visibility of power that schools have over Latino communities and in particular parents who want to become actively engaged in the education of their children. Dissonance where Latino parents and internal school ideologies collide becomes problematic. The objectification status perceived by the parents in reflects the asymmetrical power and the deficit view held by schools about Latin@ families. The power of

visibility of schools allows for them to interact with parents in such ways where they are able to further marginalize parents because they enter into a discourse with parents where they know what the ultimately are expecting of the Latino families. This set of preconceived expected behaviors that Latino families should ascribe to leads to the hegemonic practices surrounding the puppetry of Latino families. The misappropriation of Latino parental engagement illustrates how schools become 21st century colonizers based on the their abuse of power of Latino parents by requiring them to conform to traditional notions of parental involvement such as attending meetings and volunteering.

#### *6.4. The empowered families: Cutting puppet strings*

A recent shift in the study of Latino parents in schools is to center on the empowerment of this community and on how schools in particular can serve as spaces to create advocacy (Jimenez-Castellanos & Ochoa, 2016; Olivos *et al.*, 2011). Through their research, the authors reveal that tensions exist between the ways schools approach and implement Latino parental engagement and what the parents and community desire as their role. In their study this is explained through a «vertical» approach centered on a top-down reform by the school and district as opposed to a «horizontal leadership approach» in which parents and community members are valued (p. 104). Similarly, our study also reflects instances where dissonance between Latino parents and school ideologies collide. In terms of the «vertical» approach our findings support that there are behaviors that are purposeful or not behavior conscious or unconscious that leads to positive or negative hegemonic practice. The results of this study look at the ways families who are treated like puppets by schools become empowered by the alternative forms of family engagement.

## **7. Conclusions**

This research study aims at redefining Latino family engagement and to expose the ways families are treated by school administration, and officials. Its findings aim at departing from traditional forms of engagement in order to highlight the need to shift the paradigm from static forms of engagement (overrepresentation of the same families always present). It highlights the need to build relationships with the families in order to understand what behavior and macroaggressions families experience which lead to families not getting involved. Through the voices of the families involved it addresses the critical of understanding what communities and families need. Families expressed the need for alternative forms of engagement which highlight the familial cultural wealth (giving power back to families). And that moves away from puppetry pedagogies enacted by those involved with families within educational settings. Results of this study highlight the need for schools and community programming need to emphasize the importance of culturally relevant parental academic involvement for refugee and Latino/a families and move away from deficit notions of families as it relates to schooling.

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