

Fall 2018

# Helping The District'S Latino Families Become More Independent In Accessing Online Tools Provided By The School District

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HELPING THE DISTRICT'S LATINO FAMILIES BECOME MORE INDEPENDENT  
IN ACCESSING ONLINE TOOLS PROVIDED BY THE SCHOOL DISTRICT

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Education

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

December 2018

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Overview

Communications between school and families have become increasingly complex. School staff expects families to have access to information so as to be active participants in their children's education. Parents also expect to find the information about their child's school readily available. Today we are mostly relying on the internet to spread the word about what is happening at the school.

Working with the Latino population, I find extra challenges to parents having access to this information. The lack of language skills, limited usage of electronic devices and lacking internet connection present a problem that I would like to help solve, thus my research question is: *How can we help the district's Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?*

In this chapter, I will narrate my personal journey, which has led me to my job today. Then I will describe how I encountered difficulties trying to find an easy way for parents to use and interact with the resources available online. I will explain why my research question is important to the families, and students and staff.

#### Personal Journey

I am a native from Uruguay, where I obtained my degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). I started teaching there in 1998 working with adult students who were attending night school to finish their high school degrees. English as a foreign language was one of the core subjects they had to take. I worked with students who came

from very challenging environments. Most of them were older than I was, they worked long days, and came to school in the evening, ready for a challenge. Most of them had a very clear objective: getting their high school diploma.

I worked with adult education for 5 years. Along the way I saw students succeed, I saw many drop out, and one of them die. I learned to acknowledge the privileges that my personal situation provided me with.

In 2000 I applied to an exchange program where I would come to the United States to spend a year working as a teaching assistant in a school while living with a local family. I worked with the Spanish teacher of a suburban high school. I went back to my country, taught for a couple of years there and eventually moved permanently to Minnesota in 2005 where my husband was living.

I did not have a Minnesota teaching license when I first moved here. Because of this barrier to teaching, in 2006, I started working as a Latino Liaison for a suburban school district. This was a huge learning experience, as I was virtually ignorant of how the school system worked and what the expectations for families and students were. The position that I held was created when I was hired. Thus, I had to figure out what was needed and to learn as problems arose and I faced different situations in the job.

In 2007, I started taking classes at Hamline University, working towards my English as a Second Language teaching license. A couple of years later I obtained the license, but continued to work as a Liaison. I already had experience as a high school teacher in low income schools in Uruguay. The students of those schools were struggling to make their own, and often, their children's lives better. These two work experiences

blended together and at some point in my career it started to make sense that working with the Latino families in the public schools was what I wanted to keep doing. I have been working as a Latino Liaison for the last 11 years.

One of the big issues that I find parents facing in relation to their children is following what is happening with them in the classroom and school. While online tools have provided much better avenues for communication with parents in general, there are many parents in the school for whom this move to online communication has caused even more of a barrier and a divide to their participation in their children's education.

I have noticed a change in expectations from the school staff on the ways in which parents should obtain information from the schools. Most parents now have access to internet, smartphones, laptops and tablets. They register their children for school and learn about things related to school, from building closings due to the weather to their children's grades by going online.

This experience is what guides this Capstone Project question: *How can we help the district's Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?*

### **Context of the Project**

As a Latino Liaison, I am often confronted with the fact that most Latino families who are not fluent in English, depend on friends or interpreters to help them understand the daily works of their children's school. Schools are also increasingly transmitting messages through their websites. Although most parents I work with have smartphones, the majority do not use them to access the school website. It is also worth noting that

smartphones do not allow for an easy reading of a complex website such as a school district's.

Different schools and teachers choose to communicate in different forms, so there is not a uniform plan on how to disperse important information to parents. I find myself making phone calls to let parents know about things that have been published in different ways, but none of them fulfilling the needs of these parents. When I get calls from staff asking me to communicate something to parents, and I know that communications has been sent in many different ways, I realize that we are not communicating in an effective manner. That can happen when for example a teacher asks me to reiterate that there will not be class on a certain day because the teachers are having a workshop. This information is posted on the parent portal and district website but when parents are not checking those sites the information is not being passed on. I believe that all families deserve to be self sufficient in a manner which allows them to easily find their way around understanding how the school system works and what is expected from them.

Some of the schools in our district have Latino Liaisons on site who can help families, others do not. The availability of a liaison depends on the percentage of Latino population of the school. The job of a Latino Liaison is not a licensed position. The guidelines and job description seem to change district by district which makes the expectations from families and staff vary too. This can be an advantage as it means it is a position flexible enough to adapt to each particular situation. However, it also has its challenges as some liaisons take upon themselves the work that parents should be performing. Although I consider the job that we Liaisons perform very important, I still



believe that families should be able to independently navigate the school system and find the information they need. Depending on their age, students may be able to transmit information to their parents. However, this can be the source of different problems. Having to explain to their parents how they have to help them with school matters can be a source of anxiety for young students, especially because many times they do not have the language level required to explain that information in Spanish. Although they are bilingual, the language register that students use at home is different from the one used at school. Students may not necessarily be able to translate the English academic language used in school into Spanish.

The fact that access to the internet has increased, does not mean that there is a better understanding of school matters. In fact, the different digital sources of information that the parents are exposed to at the moment can be overwhelming. There is an assumption by school staff that all parents are prepared to use the online resources provided by them and by the district. However, just because parents are carrying a smartphone that has internet access may not mean that they can easily navigate the sites that provide information about their children's school. This is a two-pronged issue as there is a language barrier and a barrier to the access to information delivered electronically.

Even if we all seem to agree on the benefits of creating family schools partnerships, I see a lack of multiple sources of information provided to families. It would be in the students' interest to have a clear path for their families to obtain information from the schools and to provide information to the schools. I believe that with a concerted

effort between the different schools, an efficient system can and should be implemented in the school districts.

My project will be the creation of instructional videos for Spanish speaking parents. There will be four videos on these topics: how to navigate the parent portals, how to enroll students online and how to apply for free and reduced lunch. The videos will be easily available to parents.

As I do my daily work as an educator, I try to remind myself that the ultimate reason for our work is the success of all learners and that can only be achieved when we engage consistently with parents. I will take this project as an opportunity to improve this engagement as much as it is possible within the realms of my position. I expect that the results I can achieve with this project will be used district wide by my colleagues and by the district staff in general. Although I believe I have developed great relationships with the families I work with, I still feel that my job is not succeeding completely if there is not an effort to provide equity in the way that communications are offered to all families.

Helping Latino families to become more independent using the tools that the district provides to communicate is the goal of this project. It is an important piece of my daily work and something that our families deserve in order to become active members of the parent community.

During this chapter I have discussed the need to find a way to communicate with the Latino parents in our district that is effective. I wrote about my personal journey and how my life experiences working with underserved students in Uruguay and in Minnesota brought this personal interest in the improvement of the services with provide

the Latino parents at our schools. In the next chapter I will review literature that will present the current situation of Latinos and their use of internet and electronic devices to access school information.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

“In order to support and engage all immigrant families, school districts, and communities, we must first understand the unique needs and experiences of these families” (Han, 2012, p. 172). This quote serves as the pillar to my research for the question: *How can we help the district’s Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?* The focus of this project is Latino families: how they receive communications from the school district, and what their preferences and challenges are. The school district where I based my project, has a Latino population of 18% unevenly distributed across 14 schools.

The first section of this chapter will focus on Latino family culture. There will be a definition of culture and how this affects the way in which individuals behave. Culture will also be considered in relation with parental involvement in schools.

The second section will consider the access to technology that Latino families have. It is difficult to have an accurate account of this information as it is constantly changing. However, there are many sources that attempt to assess the differences between ethnic groups in their access and use of electronic devices and the internet.

Finally, the third section will focus on how the district is communicating with families in general. This part will cover the methods that the district studied chooses for the purpose of dispersing information. There will be a description of the most popular methods currently being used. These include websites, text messaging, email, and phone

calling. Also mentioned will be other means of communicating with families that are used by different schools. The advantages and disadvantages of their use with Latino families will be discussed.

### **Family's culture**

This section will provide information on the Latino immigrants that form a large part of our community, their general circumstances and how this influences the relationship they have with the schools.

Definitions of culture abound. One which brings together many factors encompassed in the word was stated by Nieto (2000), "the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class and religion" (p. 139). However, within a culture, there are different identities that have to do with social status, education, and place of residence that modify the way in which the members of a so called culture see themselves (Nieto, 2000). The circumstances which bring Latino immigrant families to the United States have important implications in their identity as members of a group. In this work I will focus on the Latino families whose children attend a Minnesota suburban public school district, and who have requested interpreter assistance in order to navigate the school system. The suburb which is home to this district is divided by an interstate freeway. This division is not only geographical but also a divide marked by the wealth of their population and the price of housing. Houses in the eastern part of town are older and of lower quality. Also, there are more minority and

immigrant families living in this part of the suburb (Smetanka, 2010). The families' needs studied on this capstone mostly live on the east side of the city and they do not have higher education.

Communication that is not clear, concise, and simply written will not achieve the results needed (Ting-Toomey, 1999). An added difficulty for Latino parents is their diverse origins, which brings language issues that have to do with vocabulary choice and accent. "Each intercultural contact can bring about identity dissonance or stress because of attributes such as an unfamiliar accent, way of speaking, way of doing things, and way of nonverbal expression" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 7). Immigrant families that require translation and/or interpretation usually have a lower education level that is reflected in the Spanish register they will understand. As Cartledge and Fellows (1996) indicated, each individual or group of people has a language which acts as a mirror, reflecting their lifestyle. That language is the tool that constructs the group's system. There is a fine line between the respect every person deserves in terms of obtaining accurate information about school programs and activities, and making meaning comprehensible. Sometimes the decision of how to deliver the information to a parent has to be made on an individual basis. Achieving language which is appropriate, and finding culturally competent ways of communicating with Latino families, should be an ongoing task of district staff.

The realities of immigration are quite complex and although many parents do immigrate for better educational opportunities for their children, they do not have integrated in their culture that school expects them to be a part of the triangle

student-school-parent. They may keep distance with the school, in what they see as a sign of respect (Kugler, 2011).

Han (2012) researched four different stages of parental involvement which are common for immigrant families according to their level of participation in schools. These are: cultural survivor, cultural learner, cultural connector and cultural leader.

- Cultural Survivor: As their name indicates, cultural survivors are focusing on meeting the basic needs of their family. Thus they focus mostly on getting their children enrolled in school and having such essentials as free and reduced lunch applications completed. This group of parents need support from staff for all school matters.

- Cultural Learner: The cultural learner is more connected to their cultural peers. Although they still need translated documents, they are interested in and have more time to learn about the US school system.

- Cultural Connectors: Even if they are still learning about the system, cultural connectors help link survivors and learners. Latino culture is considered to have a collectivistic orientation, and one of the characteristics of such cultures is a “shared concern for each other’s children” (Schneider, 1993, p. 121).

- Cultural Leaders: Cultural leaders are at a place where they can be advocates for the group they represent. An interesting point is that the length of time a family has been in the United States does not affect the stage a parent is in. This classification can help district staff to understand the communication needs of different

immigrant parents in order for students to attain equitable access to learning. Kugler (2011) wonders

How do schools reach out to families like these? Perhaps the school translates a flyer for a family meeting into another language, or the hosts an international dinner. But too often, there is little personal outreach that treats the families as individuals, connecting them to school in a meaningful way. (p. 34).

Kugler (2011) also described how schools lose when they do not reach out to immigrant families in an efficient manner by missing out on the families' valuable contributions.

Learning how to communicate in a culturally appropriate way is important to unite families, education, media and government with systems of beliefs, values, norms and symbols of each culture (Ting-Toomey, 1999). It is necessary to take into account the culture of a group to answer my research question of: *How can we help the district's Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?*

### **Latino Families' Access to Technology**

With the arrival and now establishment of technology, we are faced with decisions that involve deciding what format to use so that the most parents are reached. Davenport and Eib (as cited in Juniu, 2009, p.15) stated that,

Although the use of new technologies is attractive in terms of immediacy and efficiency, it is important to recall that such use also poses a dilemma and continues to be an obstacle for a significant number of families that not have access to technology-based communication tools. (p. 15)



Even though access to technology appears to be ubiquitous, restricted modes of communication due to lack of access to internet at home, other than through cell phones, is still a challenge for many Latino families. Lack of knowledge on how to navigate educational websites can also be a barrier to online communication (Juniu, 2009). With the advance of technology, the concept of literacy has expanded to the ability to use technology to access information in order to navigate these new means of transmitting knowledge (Holcomb, Castek, & Johnson, 2007).

In the school district studied, schools provide students with Chromebook laptops to work on their school assignments (M. Hinton, personal communication, March 20, 2018). Although these laptops are intended to be used by the student, they are taken to the student's home every day and when coupled with a hotspot can be used to access the internet, thus helping to provide equitable access to technology. Some school districts are lending students hotspots, which are mobile devices which can be taken home to provide internet access for the students (Cavanagh, 2014). The school district studied also offers Kajeet hotspots available to students who do not have access to the internet at home. According to Cavanagh (2014), "Kajeet is a prepaid wireless service provider that is specifically designed for children and teenagers. The company's SmartSpot device is a portable, palm-sized Wifi transmitter that connects to 3G and 4G networks using Kajeet's wireless service". These hotspots are given to students based on the results of a survey administered by the technology department every year in February. The survey includes questions on the internet situation of the students at home, easiness or difficulty of internet use outside of school, and the different sources of internet outside of school that

the student has access to. Students at our schools are provided with hotspots to access educational materials, not necessarily for the parents to use the internet (M. Hinton, personal communication, March 20, 2018). Although for the purpose of my project, I am attempting to take into account the various ways in which parents can access the internet.

Even if most families get their internet through their smart phones and, as Lunden (2015) stated, “Among the many things that we can do with our phones today, messaging is still the most-used app in the U.S”, we cannot assume families are using their smartphones to access the internet for the purpose of reading the district’s website, or that they can easily use their phones to perform tasks such as doing an online registration. According to the Pew Research Center (López, González, A. & Patten, E. 2013), Latino internet users use their smartphones to access the internet more than Anglo American internet users. The research done by the PEW center also informs us that access to smartphones and internet among the Latino population is correlatively higher depending on the education and income level of the individual. Their research establishes that of the Latinos who do not use the internet, 79% are born outside the US. This is a fact which supports the point that the immigrant Latinos use the internet less than other communities.

Another facet of use of the internet in order to access district information, is that the different programs parents have to interact with are not necessarily user friendly. The classes are listed starting with a letter and number code and then the name of the class. That nomenclature may look like this: LA2008A-6 English 11 American Lit A, meaning that it is a language arts class called American Literature. This may appear obvious to

native English speakers that attended the United States school system, but it is quite difficult to grasp for an immigrant who is not an English native speaker. The tutorials available for Infinite Campus are in English.

Due to these barriers to internet access which are especially pronounced in the Latino community, schools find it necessary to use an array of communication modes.

### **District Communication Preferences**

Communicating with families is one of the responsibilities school districts have (Lunts, 2003). The paths of communication a district uses are fundamental to promote family engagement, which leads to students' success. In this section I will present information about what type of communications the district is presently using and other strategies that have been successfully used by other schools.

Most communication between schools and parents is one way, meaning parents receive information from the school and not vice versa. In this type of communication, there is no dialogue between the school staff and the parents (Graham-Clay, 2005).

Among the many things teachers and school staff need to learn in order to perform their functions, there is not much being taught on how to communicate with parents. Teachers then are limited to their own beliefs and to learning from their colleagues' approaches.

There are different choices regarding how to reach families. Selecting the most efficient ones is necessary so that teachers' time is spent productively. The current Parent Teacher Association (PTA) National Standards for Family Partnerships (2018) suggested that communication between home and school has to be two way and meaningful. It

offers a rubric for the schools to self assess the effectiveness of their communication plan.

The Minnesota Department of Education 2018 website provides districts with materials to help encouraging and developing family engagement. This information is presented in different modules. “Diverse Cultures and Parent Voices” highlights the importance of communications being regular, two way and meaningful. Within the module “Developing Partnerships”, it is explained how schools that receive Title I funding, should follow the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2015, which established that “Schools and districts are required to ensure that all communication with parents is in a language and format accessible to them”. School district staff can access a variety of documents translated into different languages or request a language if it is not included on the list. Below I will describe different communication methods that are regularly used by many school districts.

Junius (2009) stated that “The use of computer technology has the potential to support home-school communication and consequently alleviating some of the communication challenges and barriers of time and distance that teachers and parents may face.” (p. 4). Classroom websites are another communication tool. Although there are many instances for parents and school staff to communicate, what is published on the school or district website can be accessed and reviewed multiple times. Websites are also a way to provide general information to the parents and the public, although they are not meant to provide personalized communications. Nowadays, district websites function for more than communications. They have also a marketing function as public school

enrollment has decreased in the last years (Major, 2017). Major identified the characteristics that make a school district's website excel: an intelligent design which is simple to navigate, has interactive elements, provides content which is easy to access, and gets messages across. The website of the district studied, provides some of its information in Spanish. Parents can click on a tab, which is fairly easy to locate. The information available is the name of Latino Liaisons who work at different schools, information about how to enroll students online, health services offered at the schools, food services, transportation services, school board, office of educational equity, and a joint declaration on immigration signed by the school board representative and the city mayor. Other information offered in Spanish on the website besides the one displayed under the Spanish tab is: school calendar and annual reports that were translated into Spanish until 2013, now there's a statement encouraging parents to contact the Office of Educational Equity if they need help with translations. When scrolling down, there is the possibility of seeing the whole content of the website in Spanish translated by Google™.

Within the district, every school has a school website. According to Piper (2012), school websites have to keep up with other well designed and attractive sites which parents access daily and need to be easy to view and navigate on multiple devices. The individual schools at the district studied have a similar website format which includes general information about the school and, information about the classrooms, programs, staff directory, and student and staff resources. Parents can access their student grades, attendance and behavior information through a platform which is available on the district and school websites. The district studied uses Infinite Campus™ and The Hub for that

purpose. These can be excellent tools in keeping parents updated with their children's information, however, for data privacy, parents have to receive a username and password through their email in order to login to access the information and to provide for privacy to the student's data. Navigating the Infinite Campus website can be cumbersome for the person who is not familiar with the grading system, class names and abbreviations used throughout (Pegueros, 2014).

Another mode of communication that is increasingly being used by teachers for instructional and communication purposes are classroom websites (Tingen and Holcomb, (2010). These websites have the function to connect the classroom with the families. They are also an efficient way to disseminate course content and showcase student's work (Junius, 2009). Parents can use the classroom website to support their children academically and to find out about classroom events. The amount of information which can be included in them surpasses what can be sent in paper. Calendars embedded in the website are an efficient way for the teacher to publish classroom events such as due dates for homework, field trip announcements or special guests visiting the classroom. Starkman (as cited in Juniu, 2009, p.6) indicates that calendars allow the functionality to send automatic emails or text message reminders thus saving teacher's time. Classroom websites that are not updated, however, will deter parents from checking them often (as cited in Junius, 2009, p. 6). In the district studied, some schools have classroom websites, although there is not uniformity with the format each teacher uses.

Text messaging is another way to reach out to families. Some schools are using platforms such as Remind™ (L. Durene, personal communication, March 9, 2018), which

present many advantages: It is a free application, schools can send text messages through an app or through the website, parents do not need to download an app in order to receive reminders because they come as text messages. For that same reason, they do not need to have smart phones. Messages can be translated into many languages. Parent contact information can be downloaded from a spreadsheet so there is no need to enter it manually. On the downside: contact information may have been erroneously entered in the school database. Thus parents may not be getting the messages, although that can happen with any other means of communication which is not face to face. Furthermore, the school does not know if parents received the message unless they react with a response.

As a communication tool, email is asynchronous, which means that the communication does not happen at the same time. “Email provides parents with the two-way communication when they need to pull information or respond when needed” (Olmstead, 2013, p. 30.) Parents receive emails from the school district, the school and the teacher. The district and the school as organizations send mass communications through email. Teachers can use email to send messages to the whole group of parents or to parents individually including specific information about their child. Some of the advantages of e-mail is that teachers can send a mass message to all of the parents in their classroom but parents can individually respond if they have questions and comments. Also, e-mails can be sent and read when it is convenient for the parent and teacher and files can be attached. Some of the drawbacks of this type of communication is that it adds after hours work to the teachers. Besides, many people do not check their emails

regularly. However, “ if parents find that their messages are read and responded to in a timely manner, they might choose to use this type of communication more frequently” (Lunts, 2003).

Phone calling is a very personal way to communicate with parents. However, it has the limitation that teachers and school staff can only do it during working hours, when parents may also be working. The content of the personal phone call is also important, “Most schools communicate largely through flyers and form letters; when they do make personal contact, it’s usually just to deliver bad news. No wonder some families never want to pick up the phone if the call is from school” (Kugler, 2011, p. 35). There is a tendency to use personal phone calls for urgent messages which most of the times include negative information about the student.

Automated voice messaging systems, also called robocalls, can be very useful to contact a large number of families. Most districts use them to disperse emergency information regarding school closings because of weather, lockdowns, and school holidays. “Voice-calling systems allow parents to keep in touch with the school by having messages sent to their preferred phone number, whether it is a cell phone, work phone, or home phone” (Olmstead, 2013, p. 30). Disadvantages to this system are that they only allow for one way communications. When used indiscriminately they may end up being ignored by parents. Also, like text messaging, there is the issue of changing phone numbers.



Personalized messages, either written, or by phone, have proven to bring tangible positive results. For this type of communication to happen, there need to be systems and supports for the teachers (Sobel & Kugler, 2007).

Another issue in terms of communications with parents is that educators may think a parent has a good command of English because the parent is answering in English during a conference. However, knowledge of academic terms or the nuances of the United States school system may not be clear for the parent (Breiseth, 2007). According to Kugler (2011) “Schools need new parent engagement strategies that reflect the realities of today’s diverse families” (p. 35). Diverse languages is one of those realities.

Common barriers to communication are lack of school wide policies and lack of teacher time for communications. A teacher protocol on communications can be one of the ways to help streamline them (Kraft, 2017). Epstein included a checklist to assess a school to home and home to school communication formats relating to school programs and children’s progress. The list includes the development of communications with parents who speak other languages than English which can be done by contacting parents of students who have academic and behavioral problems holding conferences, and sending folders with academic samples among other topics (Epstein, 2009, p. 326). Junius (2009) also presented a list of questions which teachers can ask themselves before selecting a mode of communication:

- (a) What is the nature of the message? Does it require: private communication, collaboration, or dissemination?
- (b) What type of technology do parents and teachers have access to?
- (c) What are their technology literacy skills?
- and (d) Will

the computer mediated communication substitute traditional communication means or will it complement offline communication?" ( p. 5).

Communications tend to change with the level of the students. Elementary schools use folders and more written forms of communication in general. In middle and high school contact between schools and families becomes more scarce even though there are many system changes that parents should be informed about. Studies by Child Trends (2008, Differences by Grade section) found that:

Parents have higher rates of attendance at school meetings, conferences, and events, and of volunteering in their child's school, when their child is in elementary or middle school. In 2016, at least 90 percent of students in kindergarten through eighth grade had a parent who attended a general meeting with their teachers, compared with 82 percent of students in grades nine through twelve. In the same year, 92 percent of students in kindergarten through second grade and 90 percent of students in third through fifth grade had a parent who attended a scheduled parent-teacher conference, compared with 73 percent of middle school students and 58 percent of high school students.

Classroom websites in the secondary levels, for example, include mostly academic content and not so much general information about the class. Although face to face communication is still a very effective way of two way communication (Graham-Clay, 2005). However, due to time restrictions it usually happens twice a year during parent-teacher conferences or when the teacher or parent request it. In the case of

Latino parents that do not speak English, an interpreter is recommended instead of using the student or a sibling (Robertson, 2007).

A school district in Fairfax County, Virginia, implemented what they called “school readiness teams” to support immigrant parents in understanding the school system (Fulcher & Sobel, 2012) These teams specifically worked with making sure that families and children were ready to start school. Some of the connecting tasks they performed were having Spanish speaking staff calling homes and asking if they knew when school started and if they had registered their children.

Another important point to consider when sending out information in Spanish is how the language is translated. Nowadays we are fortunate to have free translation services such as Google Translate, which is “a free multilingual machine translation service developed by Google, to translate text.” (Google Translate, 2018) The use of such a tool can be taught to parents at family nights by school staff (Johnson, 2015). Although such services can ease the language barriers and are frequently used by teachers and school staff, languages are more than a system of words based on a prescribed set of sounds and grammatical rules. The individual must learn to use this system in the context of the culture so that speech acts will be meaningful and accepted. If the cultural context is misunderstood, social discord can result (Ting-Toomey, 1999)

The possibilities of communication which schools have nowadays seem endless. The more traditional methods of interacting with parents are now used with computer mediated communication. Despite the benefits of choices which are available, there is a lot of thought that has to be given to the methods used to communicate with families.

Important research is available on how schools can prepare a communication plan. Latino families are increasingly added each year to student enrollment. “Latinos accounted for 25% of the nation’s 54 million K-12 students in 2016, up from 16% in 2000.” (López, M., Krogstad, J. & Flores, A. 2018) Specific considerations of culture and language, and their particular barriers to access to technology, have to be taken into account with these families in order to answer my research question of: *How can we help the district’s Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?* The lack of equity in the access to the internet and devices, together with the new concept of literacy which includes knowledge of how to obtain information electronically, present a challenge to the Latino parents.

The literature review which was the basis for this chapter, provided me with a background on the concept of family culture, Latino families’ access to technology, and the district’s communication preferences. I learned about the needs of Latino families in terms of technology literacy, and the different stages that immigrant families go through in their path to becoming involved with their children’s school. Finally, I researched the means most commonly used by school staff to communicate with families, and specifically, my district communication model. Doing some research on my district, helped me understand what is in place at the moment to reach out to families and how close the district is in terms of fulfilling the guidelines suggested by the Minnesota Department of Education. I also learned about other tools available and how schools use them.

Chapter three will describe the details of the project I will be working with in order to improve one aspect of district communications with the Latino families. I will describe how the literature review informs the project, and explain the research framework I use.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I discussed the findings of existing literature on the topic of school communications and family culture in order to help answer my question, *How can we help the district's Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?* I presented the issues, which this particular group is faced with when trying to use tools that are widely available to mainstream parents in the schools. Those issues are language differences, cultural differences and difficulties obtaining the devices and internet access.

In this chapter I will describe the participants of the program, the settings and how I will develop the project.

My project consists of instructional videos for the Latino parents that do not speak English. I created four videos: one of them is to guide parents through the online registration process, another with instructions on how to fill out the free and reduced lunch forms, and the two last videos provide instructions on how to access the district parent portals.

#### **Research**

The focus of my research was communications with the Latino families and the use of new technologies in order to perform tasks that would improve their children's success in school.

Davenport and Eib (as cited in Juniu, 2009, p.15) stated that,

Although the use of new technologies is attractive in terms of immediacy and efficiency, it is important to recall that such use also poses a dilemma and continues to be an obstacle for a significant number of families that do not have access to technology-based communication tools.

The context where this project will be developed includes Latino families who are new immigrants to the country and are not efficient users of school technology tools.

Lack of knowledge on how to navigate educational websites can also be a barrier to online communication (Juniu, 2009). When we see parents carrying and using smartphones we assume that they have the access and knowledge of the technology required to perform tasks requested by the schools. However, this may not be always the case.

With the advance of technology, the concept of literacy has expanded to the ability to use technology to access information in order to navigate these new means of transmitting knowledge (Holcomb, Castek, J., & Johnson, 2007). However, when Latino parents are asked to complete tasks online for their children's schools, it may not come as second nature to them.

### **Framework**

My research rationale follows a pragmatic worldview. Patton (as cited in Cresswell, 2013) asserted that in this paradigm, "There is a concern with applications –what works– and solutions to problems" (p. 39). The idea for this research project came out of a problem that I have in my daily work. Everyday I am aware of the many tasks

that absorb the day of a Liaison and how much of that time is used helping families with the minutiae of what are considered simple daily tasks by other parents. The issue which requires a solution in this case is the need for help with technology. For some families this need is a constant obstacle accessing school information. Having to ask for help with tasks which could be implemented by themselves puts Latino parents at a disadvantage in being an active participant in their children's education. The ultimate aim of this project is to change the present situation and empower the Latino families to be more independent in navigating the school system.

### **Participants and Settings**

The audience of the project is the Latino families living in my school district. These parents need help using new technologies to interact with the schools such as online registration, accessing the parent portal, and filling out free and reduced lunch forms. The setting of the project is a suburban midwestern school district, which is geographically divided between a wealthier area and an area where lower income families live. The school district has an 18% Latino population. The distribution of the population is quite uneven, varying from a school located in the wealthier area of the district which has a 14% Latino students, and a school located on the less affluent side of town with 48% Latinos. The fact that most Latino students who attend our school district come from a low socioeconomic status environment makes the use of internet tools a challenging task. The videos will be available to any family which needs them. School staff will be informed of their availability so that they are able to direct the families to use them. By creating specific videos for their needs, this group will have an opportunity to



become independent in their interactions with the school. They will also be able to use this learning content at their own convenience, allowing for the Latino Liaisons to use their time in ways that can be more effective.

### **Project Description**

In order to answer my research question, *How can we help the district's Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?*, I will create instructional videos to help with four specific online platforms used by the school district to obtain and transmit information to and from the families. The platforms the district uses includes online registration, parent portals and free and reduced lunch online application. I will create videos instructing users how to register the students online, how to navigate the parent portals where attendance, grade, behavior and other information is displayed, and lastly, a video on how to fill out the free and reduced lunch application. The reason for choosing videos instead of another mode of instruction is that it is relatively easy for the school district to implement. One video can reach an unlimited number of persons. There is room for instant feedback such as comments by the users. The videos can be modified and/or removed by the owner. Lastly, they can be accessed remotely at any time by the parents. All the videos will be recorded in neutral Spanish which avoids idioms and other local grammatical features. This will make the videos understandable to any Spanish speaking parent. The content of the videos will consist of screen recordings of the website that the parent needs to use with a voice recording explaining the different steps that need to be followed while at the same time, the person recording the video is actually performing the task of enrolling a

student or filling out the free and reduced lunch form. In the case of the parent portal, there will be a walk through the different information that is available to parents. To record the videos I will use the program QuickTimePlayer™ that is available on Mac computers. The parent portal, for example, has information about grades, disabilities, attendance, and behavior. The student's private information will be protected while recording the screens so that no student can be identified. In creating the content for the video I will take into account what the learning goals are, the topics to be covered, and the length of the video.

In order to improve the quality and helpfulness of the videos, I will have two other Latino Liaisons that work at the same district, and that are familiar with the topic, watch the videos and give me feedback on them. A second step is that the videos will be presented to a few families to verify that they can actually interact with the videos by accomplishing the tasks explained. These steps will ensure that the information is presented in a clear way and that the videos are ready to be published. Latino Liaisons working at the district will keep track of the families they help enroll online. The data will be compared before the videos are made available to the families and after three months of implementing the project. We will also be able to check how many views the instructional videos have on Youtube. Depending on the success of the videos I will consider increasing the topics to create a video library available to parents.

I will start developing the project during the summer of 2018. Because during the summer school staff is not always available for consultation, I am planning to finalize the project during the fall and before the winter break of the same year.

## Summary

Following the research question *How can we help the district's Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?*, this chapter reviewed the challenges Latino parents face using available online tools provided by the school district. I presented some of the reasons for these challenges and the expectations that fall upon schools in terms of communications with diverse families. I described the settings and the participants of the project. Later, I described how I will implement a project geared towards a better understanding of some features that parents need to manage. Finally, I explained how I propose to measure the success of the project.

The next chapter will be a reflection based on the results related to the implementation of the project.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### REFLECTION

#### Introduction

My research question for this capstone is: *How can we help the district's Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?* As a Latino Liaison, I'm faced with the fact that most Latino families who are not fluent in English struggle to access and understand the electronic platforms which schools use to interact with parents. I believe that all families deserve to be able to independently find their way around understanding how the school system works and what is expected from them.

In this chapter I reflect on the major learnings from creating the final product. I explain how the literature reviewed in chapter two supported my research question, influenced and helped me guide this project. The implications for the district and limitations of my research are also described.

In chapter one, I presented my background and the reasons for creating my project based on my research question. Chapter two is a review of major findings in research that helped me shape my project. Chapter three uses the research presented in chapter two to explain how I created my project.

For this project, I worked on four videos intended to help Spanish speaking families navigate the online registration process, the free and reduced lunch application, and the two parent portals that the district uses. Although an application for free and reduced lunch is used nationally, and one of the parent portals is used by other districts, I

included information specific to our district, such as where to obtain the information to be able to login in the portal. I tried to make the videos short and easy to understand. That was more challenging in the case of the online registration as the whole process involves going through 38 screens. In the case of the parent portals, I opted not to describe what information is on each tab, as sometimes there are many ways to access the same information, such as the student's grades. Whenever there is more than one way to look up information, I explained one of them. My idea behind this decision is that once parents are familiar with the basics of using the portal, they may be able to navigate other features on their own.

### **Major Learnings**

The development of this capstone project which included writing the first three chapters and developing the instructional videos, provided me with invaluable learning. As a Latino liaison who identifies herself as Latina, I have an understanding of how my culture operates in respect to schools. I am aware of how Latino parents connect with the schools in contrast to how white parents do so. This understanding comes from my own experiences as a liaison, an immigrant, and a parent of a child who attends a public school in Minnesota. The reflection on my own background that I did while writing chapter one, together with the literature review in chapter two, widened that understanding.

Immigrant parents are at various stages of assimilation which may place them in different positions when navigating school systems. However, not all of them go through all these stages of assimilation. Those who remain in a place which only allows them to

survive in their environment will need more assistance from the schools to be able to help their children.

As happens in other realms of the immigrant experience, inequities are also present when accessing technology. This can be due to lack of resources to buy devices or difficulty understanding the usage that schools expect from them. With the development of this project I evidenced that these inequities affect the way that Latino parents can interact with the schools. However, I also realized that there are steps that the district can take to help bridge the difference among the population of parents.

Writing research at the capstone level was both challenging and enlightening. Having my writing reviewed by different people provided me with reassurance in the project. My experience on the job and what I learned during the course of the program has extended my understanding of my position, I feel more prepared now to write professional works of research which can enrich my field, and to present my findings during staff meetings and professional development workshops.

The last major learning was the realization that I am in a privileged position which allows me to help these parents and to work for change to happen within the district. It is an honor to be in such a position. I feel it is my duty to service these families to the best of my abilities.

### **Literature Review**

In order to learn more about my question, I turned to different authors who helped me to better understand characteristics of the Latino culture and best ways to communicate with them. Kugler (2011) stated the importance of connecting with

immigrant families in a meaningful way. In order for my work to be relevant, I had to take into account the way I reach out to the parents, in this case through instructional videos. I learned that it should be done in a way that avoided the unfamiliar accent or way of speaking that Ting-Toomey (1999) mentioned. I considered what Holcomb, Castek, and Johnson (2007) highlighted in terms of new concepts of literacy that nowadays expand to the ability to use technology to access information. I realized that the population I work with, Latino parents who request an interpreter for communication, may be experiencing two barriers to interact with the schools: a language barrier and a technological barrier.

### **Project Implications**

As I give access to staff to the videos I have created, a possible implication may be questioning if we are using the best parent portal for our district and if we should consider a different one. Questions may arise such as: Is all the information which shows in the parent portal relevant? Is the information presented in a clear way? There may also be a questioning of the online registration process which schools are encouraging parents to use. Is this the best system to have parents enroll their children in school? Are there any ways to simplify it? Do we need all of the information that we are requesting? Should there be a paper version?

My work will not stop here. As the next school year begins, more parents will be able to access the instructional videos on how to fill out the free and reduced lunch forms or the online registration tutorial. These are steps which parents need to complete by the end of the summer or the beginning of the fall. I will have the length of this school year

to find out from the parents how the videos are working and what type of modifications are needed. This will allow the videos to be modified to work according to the parents' needs by the summer following the school year.

More research can be done in terms of having a uniform system which all schools in the district use to reach out to parents. The district could implement a system which is inclusive of the diverse populations.

### **Project Limitations**

Some limitations of my projects are that it only includes four instructional videos. There are different topics which families need help with that go beyond the ones I chose to work on. However, producing these videos became easier each time and I plan on working on more as I see the need arise. There are other projects related to this one which may be implemented. I believe though, that in order to reach out to parents in an effective way, a district wide assessment of communications should be implemented. This project will be too limited if there is not an attempt to make uniform the communication systems which the schools are using. These efforts cannot come just from one person, but need to be executed by a team. I am pleased that I have encountered staff at different schools who are willing to hear about my project and are interested in promoting and dispersing the ideas.

### **Communicating Results**

I am dispersing this information in different ways. One of them is sending a link to the Youtube video directly to the parent. Text messaging parents is the easiest way for me to reach them. This method of sharing videos is not the most effective in terms of



reaching a high number of parents, but it is through having individual contact with parents that I have been learning about the need for them to understand this information. Thus, it just seems natural for me to send a text message to each parent as the need arises.

The videos will be posted on the Facebook site of the Office of Educational Equity which reaches 429 families in the district.

I have presented my project at two meetings with counselors and staff at the different middle and high schools in the district. Moreover, I have met with the person in charge of information technology at one of the high schools, whom I have sent the videos and will include them in the high school parent resources tab.

During the month of January I will present my videos at the information meetings for new high schoolers that which high school will hold.

### **Benefits to the Profession**

The idea for this project was born out of the everyday observations I have had while conducting my job. I noticed a need within the Latino parents whom I work with, and I decided to implement something which would benefit the parents and the district. Having to complete a capstone for the program provided me with a clear opportunity to work on a project geared towards helping the Spanish speaking families. At present there are five Latino liaisons who work for the district. Three of them work for schools with a higher number of Latino students, one of them works with four schools, and the other with the remainder of the schools which do not have a liaison on site. All of them can direct parents to the instructional videos and will find in them a useful tool to aid them in their work. The slides which the videos are based on, can have the accompanying video

recorded in any language. The school district also has a number of Somali liaisons who could record the videos using the same slides in Somali if they deem that their use would benefit that population. Furthermore, the videos could be recorded in English and be made available for the benefit of all of the district families.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have reflected on the process of finding answers to the question, “*How can we help the district’s Latino families become more independent in accessing online tools provided by the school district?*”. In order to answer that question, I have created four instructional videos to assist Spanish speaking parents.

The capstone project has given me the confidence to study an issue that matters to the families whom I work for, and to try to find ways to resolve it. Through the literature review and my reflections on my daily work, I could learn about the situation of Latino immigrant families with regards to schools, and what tools I have in order to help these parents.

While working on my project, I had to go back to the literature review to guide me through the theoretical and technical issues involved in creating it.

This project has widened the knowledge of the needs and challenges of the population I work with. I believe it has made me a better educator and will help my colleagues with the families’ needs.

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