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## Building Collective Ownership in the School Community Through Authentic Engagement of Latino Families and Students: A Professional Development for School

Molly Barajas

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Building Collective Ownership in the School Community Through Authentic  
Engagement of Latino Families and Students: A Professional Development for School  
Staff

by  
Molly Barajas

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of the Arts in Teaching

Hamline University  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Background.....	6
Personal Connection.....	8
Research Focus.....	10
Summary.....	12
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	14
Chapter Overview.....	14
Importance of Family Involvement for ELL Success.....	15
Family Engagement Research Model.....	19
Factors Preventing Successful Engagement.....	20
Latino Parents/ Educational Backgrounds.....	21
Cultural Differences/Educational Expectations.....	22
Collectivist/Individualist Culture.....	23
Language Barriers.....	24
Supports and Strategies for Successful Engagement.....	25
Building Trust and Appreciation.....	25

Parental Confidence in Schools.....	27
Connect to Learning.....	28
Making ELL Success a Priority.....	29
Traditional and Nontraditional Models of Parental Involvement.....	29
PIQE.....	31
Parent Mentors.....	32
Real Life Examples of Collective Ownership.....	32
Conclusion.....	34
CHAPTER THREE: Project Description.....	36
Introduction.....	36
Project Overview.....	36
Project Description.....	37
Outline of Learning Objectives.....	37
Rationale.....	39
Context.....	42
Observed Needs.....	43
Outline and Timeline.....	45

Project Goals.....	45
Summary.....	46
CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion/Reflection.....	48
Introduction.....	48
Learnings from the Project/Capstone.....	49
The Literature.....	52
Limitations.....	53
Where Do We Go From Here?.....	56
Benefit to the Profession.....	56
Summary Reflection.....	57
Conclusion.....	58

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Background

Over the last 25 years, the United States has seen significant changes in the demographic profile of the U.S.-student population. During that time, the fastest growing segment of the school-age population has been English Language Learners, (ELLs) doubling their numbers from approximately 2 million in 1989-90 to more than 4 million in 2004-05 (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012). Most recent findings from the US Department of Education show that number has increased to 4.8 million in 2015, which is about 9.5% of public school enrollment. According to the U.S. Department of Education, one out of every 10 students in the U.S. is learning to speak English (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In Minnesota, the number of ELLs has increased over 300% in the past 20 years (Minnesota Department of Education, 2015). These ELLs come from a variety of backgrounds, home cultures and first languages. Within this population, there are many different cultural and social norms that differ from those practiced and appreciated in the U.S. These norms are practiced in ELL homes across the country, and are not always understood or seen for the benefit they can bring to the school community. As the number of ELLs grow, teachers will need to have a better understanding of how the home communities and cultures of their ELLs affect their students' learning (positive and negative) as well as how these cultures and lessons can be an asset to the school community.

Through my own personal experience first as a Special Education paraprofessional, and now as an ELL teacher, as well as current research (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012; Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Constantini, 2013) I have learned that school communities struggle to get immigrant families involved in school events and/or the overall school community. This area of growth for many schools in Minnesota can be due to a number of factors which will be discussed in the following chapters. The purpose of this capstone is to develop and provide professional development opportunities for staff that address and clarify the importance of minority and immigrant voices being heard in the school community. Staff appreciating and understanding that not just hearing the voices of parents that understand the school system or are native English speakers is a crucial component in the equitable education of ELL students. Many immigrant families come from countries where the practices in schools and the roles of the parents are very different. Understanding these differences and working together to build a collective, equitable school community is vital to the success of all ELL students. This paper seeks to address the following research question: *What are the most effective methods to authentically engage Latino families to build collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education?* The rest of this chapter explores my background and personal connection to the research question.

### **Background of the Researcher**

My journey into education was an interesting one. I spent my 20s in a sales job, seeking the highest commissions I could each month. I was good at my job, but had very little passion for what I was doing. I was very selfish in my life; I thought very little

beyond my world of family and friends. I wasn't seeking answers to tough questions. I avoided children and had very little to do with anyone not my age or older.

The next phase of my life as I edged closer to my 30s was becoming a wife and mom. My husband is Mexican, born and raised in Guadalajara, Mexico. My husband helped open my eyes to a new world of color. I had spent most of my life up to that point in a very white world. My teachers and professors were white and my friends were white. I spent some time living in Mexico, and it was a cultural awakening for me. This culture was all about family, and collectivism. They worked and made decisions for the betterment of the extended family. Coming from the U.S. and the individualistic ideals that we hold true there, it was a very different, but amazing way to live. When we decided to start a family, I knew my children were going to grow up learning about two very different cultures. I hoped there would be appreciation for both. This time in my life, where I had to be less selfish and all about other humans, opened my mind to the world around me and the inequities within that world. It was a slow awakening, and as my own children began to navigate their space, I realized that my past job was meaningless. I looked for a job that initially worked around my children's school schedule. This led me to being a Special Education paraprofessional at a local elementary school. I very quickly had to learn to navigate the educational system as an employee, not just a parent. It was interesting and eye-opening. After a couple years, I was learning a lot from some amazing staff, and realized I was really enjoying this job, and was good at it. It was a version of parenting in my opinion, where my job was to love and care for these vulnerable children, guide them and help them through their days. I quickly learned that



my students needed to trust me before I could get them to work with me. I earned their trust by listening to them, laughing with them and helping them through some difficult times. They knew they could count on me to support them as they needed me to, and I made sure I met them where they were at.

### **Personal Connection**

What led me to pursue the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching (this area of teaching can also be called English Language Learners which is what I will refer to for the duration of this paper - ELL), was an encounter I had with a family from El Salvador. I was translating an initial IEP meeting for parents whose child needed speech services. Before we went into the meeting I was able to chat with the family. The parents shared some of their story, including that they both did not finish school, that they left in elementary school and never returned. I realized that what was waiting for them on the other side of the door was a group of mostly white, well-intentioned educators that were going to quickly overwhelm these good people with data and research as well as educational jargon that I might struggle to translate effectively. It got me to realize that my passion was evolving, and there was more I could be doing to help immigrants in the U.S. to navigate the school system and be successful, engaged community members. I realized that even well-intentioned educators may lead parents and family members to mistrust the educators of their children, and that needed to change.

When I started my studies in ELL, I continued to work as a paraprofessional, and also had multiple opportunities for field experience within the ELL community. In the first ring suburb of a major metropolitan area elementary school that I worked at, the ELL

department as well as mainstream staff were working hard to build relationships with their ELL community. However, what I witnessed was a few teachers doing all the work. Over the last few years, this hard working group of teachers had developed a monthly meeting platform called *Bring it Home* (BIH). BIH is a monthly meeting format for ELL families with the mission of engaging and giving voice to the multilingual and multicultural families through building trusting relationships that promote cultural understanding and appreciation (BIH, 2020). It started out small, with about three to five families participating monthly. In a nine month school year, they have about seven meetings, two being potluck dinners, which usually drew the biggest crowds. The average meeting participation had grown to about 15-20 active members. The meeting format typically is held in a classroom at the elementary school. Parents are encouraged to bring their children. The children are in a separate room, where they are cared for by school staff. The monthly meeting has a different agenda each month. Topics for discussion are timely, such as understanding report cards, test results and questions to ask your teacher during conferences. There are interpreters in Spanish and Somali for the parents. I also had opportunities to work at the other elementary schools in the district doing some field experience work. Each individual school was hosting their own agendas with the ELL community. Another school held a “Latino night” each October which was very well attended (about 100 people annually) but it felt very disjointed. I wondered if a more seamless approach would make more sense: pooling resources within each school, and hosting functions that were sponsored by the district, not by each school. I researched different school districts for this project, and found many districts, including the

Roseville, MN district, that had very successful events held for the ELL community that was districtwide. To have an ELL plan for giving our immigrant families a voice in their school community is best done if it is a district wide. This project will lay out how a district wide professional development to actively engage Latino and other ELL families authentically to build collective ownership in their school communities will be implemented. Also, the benefits will be explained of working together as a staff within a district to pool time and resources.

### **Research Focus**

My personal experience working with immigrant families as a paraprofessional, as well as my observations of the need for a district wide PD with regards to developing a more cohesive plan for working with ELL families is what fueled this research project. The purpose of this research is to improve teachers' understanding of the importance of the ELL family voice in their classrooms, as well as giving teachers strategies to help them engage with their families in a way that will build trust in order to improve relationships. It also will allow space for transformative learning to occur during the PD. According to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning is a rational process. As individuals reflect on and discuss their assumptions about the world, they often experience a shift in their frame of reference or world view. For this to happen, individuals engaging in reflective discourse need to challenge each others' assumptions and encourage group members to consider various perspectives. It is essential that participants engaging in reflective discourse have complete and accurate information

about the topic for discussion, be free from bias, and meet in an environment of acceptance, empathy, and trust (Mezirow, 2000).

This is not only a good idea, but it is also a law. According to Adams & Christenson (2000, as cited in Brewster & Railsback, 2003), the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), No Child Left Behind (NCLB) signaled a move from one-way communication to two-way communication between family and schools, as well as collaboration (Adams & Christenson, 2000). The inclusion of several new provisions related to family involvement reflect the gradual shift in U.S educational policy and practice from viewing parents as important players to full partners in the formal education of their child (Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

The new provisions under NCLB, particularly those under Titles I and III, expand schools' obligations to inform parents and to reach out to families who have traditionally been underrepresented in school activities and decision-making, such as parents of English language learners.

Schools that receive Title III funding, (which includes the school district in this research project) are required to implement an effective means of outreach to parents of limited English proficient children to inform such parents how they can be involved in the education of their children and to be active participants in assisting their children to learn English, to achieve high levels in core academic subjects and to meet the same challenging State academic and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet. (Brewster & Railsback, 2003, p. 3)

In current legislation, NCLB has been replaced in 2015 by the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA). Much of the language in ESSA regarding parent involvement remains the same.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I shared my experiences in what led me to my decision to become an ELL teacher and how the experiences I have had within the school district I currently work has shown me what good work is going on with supporting our ELL families.

However it has also shown me what more needs to be done to support our ELL families.

These experiences have been the foundation of my research and the reason for developing a professional development for mainstream teachers of ELLs. My research seeks to address the following question: *What are the most effective methods to authentically engage Latino families to build collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education?*

The purpose of this paper is to focus on areas of growth for effectively supporting ELL families within their school districts to help engage them in their school communities. The essential goal of the professional development included in this project is to give teachers guidelines for how to effectively build trust within their ELL families utilizing the strategies included in this project.

Chapter Two reviews relevant research regarding the importance of positive family engagement of ELL families and how that directly affects students academic success. Research is also included on why ELL families are not currently engaging in school communities and what school districts can do to positively engage their ELL families. Research-based strategies are also included to engage families in traditional and

nontraditional school roles, together with a discussion of the professional development project developed based on the conclusions researched in this paper.

Chapter Three provides the framework and rationale for the professional development project developed based on the research presented in Chapter Two. It also describes the audience and setting for the project. Chapter Three includes a timeline for completion of the project, how the effectiveness of the project will be measured, and opportunities for professional development going forward.

Chapter Four is the concluding chapter of this capstone project. It includes the important learnings from my research and it revisits the literature that is most valuable to my project. It also includes the limitations of my project in my subject area as well as benefits to the profession.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Chapter Overview

This research discusses the question: *What are the most effective methods to authentically engage Latino families to build collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education?* The following sections will review literature relating to this topic. For the sake of this research, I will be emphasizing and discussing ways that Latino families build collective ownership, but this cultural group is also part of a larger group in school systems called ELLs. The research discussed and families highlighted will have the assumption that English, although possibly spoken in their homes, is not the first language of the family members.

The first theme examines the importance of family involvement in their students' education and how this directly affects students' academic success. This can be particularly true with families where English is not spoken in the home, as there is a shift in the power dynamic between parents and children. Also included in this section are the past approaches school districts have used to address marginalized communities that typically include ELL families. These approaches have often been based on deficit views of ELL/Latino populations and how they have not recognized the social capital that exists in these communities.

The second theme will review the factors preventing the successful engagement of family in ELL/Latino students' school communities such as language barriers, along

with what needs to be built by schools (mutual trust, confidence in school and respect for cultural differences) before families can begin to feel welcome.

The final theme will consider what districts locally in MN and around the US are doing that have led to successful engagement of their Latino populations in their schools and how this success in building collective ownership can be sustained over time. This section will also review traditional and non-traditional parental involvement models used currently with school districts as well as offer new engagement strategies to help schools and ELL families continue to be successful in their communication and involvement.

### **Importance of Family Involvement for ELL Students' Success in School**

As stated in Chapter One, over the last 25 years, the United States has seen significant changes in the demographic profile of the United States student population. During that time, the fastest growing segment of the school-age population has been English Language Learners, (ELLs). Of the top five most common foreign languages spoken among ELLs, Spanish is spoken the most in ELL homes. As stated in NPR Ed (2017), the biggest majority, about 3.8 million ELL students, speak Spanish. The state with the most ELLs is California, which has 29% of all ELL learners nationwide. In this same study, Minnesota has about 8% of the ELL population (DOE, 2015). For the sake of this research, I will be focusing later in the study on how highlighted states are doing with their successful family engagement. Because Spanish is the largest majority of languages spoken in the U.S., I have chosen to focus my research primarily on Latino family engagement.



ELLs are students with limited English proficiency. Public school systems in the U.S. have a system to identify these students upon entry into the school system and then those identified students are put into programs to help them improve their English skills as quickly as possible (Lynn, 2018). The goal is to give students the academic language skills they need over time to fully take part in their classwork. ELL teachers work to help students develop their academic English skills in the four domains (reading, writing, speaking and listening) to a proficiency equivalent (or near equivalent) to their native speaking peers. When English language proficiency is achieved, studies have shown that students have a higher level of academic achievement (Lynn, 2018). However, many schools and districts around the U.S. struggle to engage and help ELLs. The identification of and screening of ELLs varies by state (and district) and can be tricky (NPR Ed, 2017). Some districts send home a survey that is used to identify home languages and previous school engagement. Larger districts are able to test students upon their entry into the school systems, and then ELL teachers can pinpoint the students' needs based on their test results (NPR Ed, 2017). What can be a struggle is the debate of placing ELLs in classrooms based on their English proficiency or with their same aged peers. Putting them with their same aged peers has social benefits of learning from and engaging with their peers, but the students tend to lag behind academically and some never catch up. All of the numbers show how ELL numbers are growing in the U.S. and many schools are not properly prepared to handle the influx of students, and they are also not prepared for how to support and welcome their parents (NPR Ed, 2017).

However, parental support, especially with ELLs is very important. Students who have parents that are engaged in their education regardless of income and background are likely to earn higher grades, attend school regularly, and have better social skills. Thirty years of research has consistently linked family involvement to higher student achievement, better attitude toward school, lower dropout rates and increased community support for education as well as many other positive outcomes for students, families and schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, despite these findings, many schools struggle to actively engage high numbers of parents in their children's schooling (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Of the families that do get involved, the majority are white and middle income, typically those whose home culture most closely matches the norm, values, and cultural assumptions reflected in the school (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Many ELL parents will say they feel unwelcome or uncertain about what their role should be in their students' education. Many Latino cultures believe that the teacher and school staff are to be respected and never challenged. Some have limited education themselves in their native countries, and even less English to communicate with their students' teachers (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012). So, it is the school's job to ask the right questions such as, "What is already in place to make ELL families feel welcome in our school community? What programs do we offer that would inspire and challenge their students to learn and achieve?" Followed by the most important question of all, "What more can we do to make our ELL families feel welcome and appreciated?"

As the ELL population has risen in the U.S., more attention has been drawn to the negative academic and social-emotional trajectories that tend to develop within this

population of students, starting in early childhood (Niehaus, 2012). Many ELLs face stressful environmental conditions such as immigration status of their parents, family separations, poverty, racism, and cultural conflicts between home and school (Niehaus, 2012). These conditions place them at a higher risk of failing and eventually dropping out of school. However, past research has consistently shown that positive classroom and school environments as well as the home environment are important to students' academic success and positive behavior outcomes. However, what will need to change is the perception schools and staff have of what active parental participation looks like (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Many schools in the past have relied on counting bodies at traditional back-to-school nights or parent-teacher conferences to gauge whether parents are engaged in their children's learning. At schools where parents don't show up for PTA meetings or volunteer to chaperone the school field trip, it can be a blame game. Teachers think parents do not care and families say they do not feel welcomed or valued. "I have never met a parent who did not care about their children or value education — but they may not show it in ways that white, middle-class people would expect," said Anne Henderson, a senior consultant for the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, based in Alexandria, Virginia (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 2). The challenge then becomes, what can schools do differently to show their ELL parents that they are valued, important members of the school community as well as wealths of knowledge in their cultures and languages? Integration of community into schools can begin when schools support ELL parental involvement opportunities by validating the cultural capital and "funds of knowledge" these parents possess. Luis Moll (as cited in

Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012) referred to funds of knowledge as the essential bodies of knowledge and information found in local households used to survive or to thrive in the world of immigrants (p. 5)

### **Family Engagement Research Model**

There are several research based models that talk about strategies and plans for how to engage ELL families with more positive outcomes. For this paper, I will discuss what Dr. Joyce Epstein, founder and director of the National Network of Partnerships schools at Johns Hopkins University has spent the last 25 years researching: the positive effects of parental involvement in school communities (Epstein, 2016). Even though Epstein reports on what schools should adopt as effective ways to engage parents, it also is important to understand that the number one way to engage ELL parents is for each teacher to make the commitment to positive parental involvement and to believe it works and will make a difference in the learning of their students (Constantini, 2013). The model by Epstein (2016) discusses six different types of parent involvement activities which schools can offer and support:

- **Parenting:** Helping parents fulfill their role as parents, providing information on items such as health, nutrition, child development.
- **Communicating:** Effective ways to keep parents informed about student progress and happenings at school.
- **Volunteering:** Includes examples of how parents can be volunteers even when they can't come to the school building.

- **Learning at Home:** Involving families in homework and other home learning activities. The Teachers Involving Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) programs is a great resource for encouraging learning at home. Parents are provided with activities that directly involve them with their child in classroom work.
- **Decision Making:** Ways to include families in school decision-making and governance. Also include families as participants in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives.
- **Collaborating with the Community:** Coordinate resources and services from the community for families, students and the school and provide services to the community.

As stated by Epstein, in order for parents to feel compelled to be engaged in their students' education, they need to feel as though they are part of the education team.

Teachers need to believe that having ELL parents involved will work in successfully engaging their students and parents in the educational process.

### **Factors Preventing Successful Engagement of ELL Latino Families in their Students' Education.**

In many school districts around the U.S., there is a population of parents that never or seldom engage in their students' school communities or their students' education. For many school districts, part of that number includes immigrant families. It is important for administration and staff to first understand what the factors are that are preventing these groups of parents from actively participating in their school communities. When these factors are uncovered and studied, school districts can begin to form ways to

authentically engage ELL families to buy into and build collective ownership of the success of the school communities.

### ***Latino Parents and their Educational Beliefs and Backgrounds***

Every parent who has a child in the U.S. school system has a different story regarding their own educational history. Those that are Latino typically are grouped by their white peers as being from Mexico because they speak Spanish. However, Latinos in the U.S. come from many different places, and each come with their own unique historical and cultural traditions. Historically, the Latino population is rooted in Spain's colonization of the New World. As stated earlier, Spanish is the largest single language minority in the U.S. Within the U.S., the Spanish dialects that are spoken vary by regions of Spain and the Americas. The three largest groups in the U.S. are Mexican (61.9%), Puerto Rican (9.7%) and Cuban (4.0%) (Pew Research Center, 2018). Latino communities in the U.S. share many linguistic and sociocultural experiences. Differences in linguistic and cultural traditions exist between various Latino groups as a result of socioeconomic factors, immigration experiences, and social dilemmas (Suarez-Orozco, 2000). However, Latinos do face similar challenges as immigrants of acculturation and coping with discrimination and prejudice that come with being a minority in the U.S.

Schools with a high ELL population face the challenge of communicating with parents, many of whom have low levels of literacy in their native language, in addition to not speaking or reading English. Many ELL parents have not completed a high school education and have little formal education compared to native-born parents (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012). Due to their race, class, immigrant status, language

proficiency, and level of education, many ELL parents fit the description of a marginalized group. Arias & Morillo-Campbell (2012) describe “marginalized parents as those who are not involved in their children's school at the same rate as many White, middle class parents. Marginalized parents often have limited exposure to schools, or prior negative experiences with school organizations” (p. 19).

### ***Cultural Differences and Expectations of Education in the Latino Community***

Even though many ELL families are considered marginalized, that doesn't mean that they are not concerned with their children's education. In particular, Latino values include family and the importance of family loyalty. Latino families are often large, and may contain multiple generations in one home. The large family units also include extended family. This large family unit forms a social support network and emphasizes interpersonal relationships and mutual respect among members (Miccio & Scheffner, 2005). Families tend to live in the same neighborhoods as other relatives, and often have daily contact with one another. Decisions are made within the family, and results take into consideration the individual as well as all family members. Traditional Latino parenting teaches children to respect authority and family values. Typical parent/child interactions are different from their white middle class counterparts. Latino children are taught to respect their elders and their parents, so they are not expected to participate in adult conversations. With regards to their childrens' education, Latino parents differ from middle class white parents. Parents do not see their role as educator for their young children before they enter school. Parents see their role as more traditional and authoritarian than Euro-American parents (Miccio & Scheffner, 2005). Once children are

in school, Latino parents show support by making sure children attend school and that they complete their homework. However, they typically do not ask questions of the teachers for fear of being critical of the teachers' practices. Because of this respect for the teacher, Latino parents may not be comfortable participating in classroom activities or school functions (Pena, 2000). According to Pena, traditional Mexican American parents believe they are being helpful when they maintain distance from their students' schools. Another reason Latino parents stay away from their students' school may stem from their not understanding the U.S. school system, or their lack of confidence in their own abilities. This rings true for many immigrant parents who may not have been able to finish their education for financial or familial reasons.

### ***Collectivist Culture vs Individualist Culture***

In many societies around the world, communities have a collectivist (group) mindset when decisions are made regarding education, public policy, and many other areas of public interest. For many of the immigrants that come to the U.S. (which is what is considered an individualist culture), the process for adapting to an individualistic mindset can be difficult (Aaker & Williams, 1998). As a general definition, in an individualist culture such as the U.S., people tend to have a more independent view of themselves. They see themselves separate from others, define themselves based on their personal traits and see their characteristics as stable and unchanging (Hopper, 2015). In a collectivist society (like cultures in Latin and South America), the people have an interdependent view of themselves. They see themselves as connected to others, define themselves in terms of relationships with others and see their characteristics as more



likely to change across different contexts (Hopper, 2015). With regard to human relationships, in an individualistic culture, relationships are often seen as voluntary and it's not uncommon to choose to end relationships that are not beneficial. Something else to keep in mind is that many of our ELL parents grew up in a collectivist society where the benefit of the community was a big factor in decision making. Many of our ELL families have children that were born in the U.S., so the students are growing up and being taught in an individualistic educational system that values individual work, grades, accomplishments, etc. This may be a hard concept for Latino parents to understand or support. When teachers are considering ways to help bridge communication with ELL families, considering the cultural differences between the U.S. and Latino cultures is an important concept to remember (Hopper, 2015).

### ***Language Barriers to Participation***

A major social barrier for many of the Latino communities is that adults are not proficient in English (Panferov, 2010). This is another barrier for families to participate actively in their students' school activities. Many families may not understand the material that is sent home from their students' school because it is only in English, so they may miss important conferences or school events due to their inability to read in English. They also may not be able to help their children with homework if it is in English only and the instructions are not included in the parents' home language. It is very important that school staff and administration understand the importance of respecting their ELL parents' culture and language and delivering information and expectations to families in a way that they are able to hear and participate as they seem fit (Arias & Morillo-Campbell,

2012). In a later section I will discuss what schools need to do to show respect for different cultures, languages, and high expectations for family-school partnerships.

### **Supports and Strategies for Latino Family Engagement**

#### ***Building Trust and Appreciation***

In the U.S. in recent years, due to attitudes of a previous presidential administration, it is no wonder that Latinos struggle to trust any entity that appears governmental. In order for any school and/or district to positively engage ELL families, trust needs to be established. How that happens is not something that will be built overnight. It is something where ELL families must believe that school personnel are qualified, fair and dependable and have their child's best interests at heart (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). A crucial first step in engaging Latino families (and any immigrant family) is to focus on building relationships of mutual trust, confidence and respect (Mapp, 2012). Mutual trust is also based on sustained positive interactions between parents and school staff, allowing for parents to be engaged as partners with their children's teachers. Trusting relationships consist of four qualities: respect, integrity, competence and personal regard (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Educators and families act towards one another with integrity. They work together with a sense of competence by recognizing that everyone can contribute towards the common goal of supporting students. Lastly, educators and families demonstrate personal regard by genuinely caring for one another. Building trusting relationships takes time and effort, but it is worth it (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012). When there is a lack of trust, barriers are formed that prevent or hinder effective school-based family engagement practices (Hong, 2011).

One example of a way teachers can begin to build trust amongst their ELL families is by having the first interaction with new families be a positive one. This can be through a home visit to introduce themselves to the family before the school year starts or by writing a note or making a phone call to report on something positive the student did during the day. Most parents want to hear good things about their child. In the Latino community it is very common for the parents to see the teachers as the experts and when they get called by the school it many times is for a negative encounter (Breiseth, 2019). Sometimes this is inevitable, so if the teacher has already reached out and made a positive connection, it will hopefully feel less like the parents can't trust their school community and be more about demonstrating to families that the school/teachers are interested in and values the relationship with the parents and the student. Another way to build trust is to let families know they are welcome in the school building. It's amazing what a good office staff can do to help with this. Proper training by administrators and also possibly having bilingual office staff is a bonus in helping families navigate through the school protocols. One thing that is the same in all languages is a smile, so that can go a long way to build trust with new immigrant families.

Another important way to build trust is to have staff in place to help Latino families with understanding the support services that are available in a school district. This is usually done through a cultural liaison. These positions are vital in a school district to help families get connected with the resources available to them. Cultural liaisons act as a bridge between schools and families and are a role model that works towards inclusion and integration of ELL families (Chavez-Reyes, 2010). They not only

support families as they learn how to navigate the U.S. school system, they can introduce families to the role parents are expected to play in home-school relationships and inform families of their rights as parents (Lannacone & Martinez-Cosio, 2007). Such information is critical for families to have, especially given the fact that family engagement is firmly embedded in federal education policy (Mapp, 2012). Within the U.S. school system, families are expected to partner with schools. Cultural liaisons help facilitate communication between educators and families that require assistance with English. While many students serve as the interpreters for their parents during important meetings (which can have a negative effect on the parent/child dynamic in a home) federal policy recommends that schools and districts seek cultural liaisons who are trained in interpretation and who abide by confidentiality policies protecting student data (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

### ***Parental Confidence in Schools***

Another way to support successful integration and/or engagement of families into a school is to allow parents to feel confident in their school's ability to educate their students and help them be successful in school. This is done in part through all staff ownership and responsibility of ELL students. The responsibility of differentiating learning for ELLs shouldn't fall solely on the ELL staff. Instead there should be collaboration on the part of mainstream teachers (elementary level) or subject teachers (secondary level) and the ELL staff (Breiseth et al., 2011). There is collaboration with regards to communication of content (from the mainstream teacher) and language objectives (from the ELL teacher) within a classroom. Also, there is home

communication, which could be in the form of a weekly/monthly newsletter to parents, in the languages represented at the school, letting parents know what is going on in their classrooms and school community. This is done more frequently in elementary schools, as the students are mainly with one teacher all day. But, it can also be done in the secondary grades as well.

However, historically this type of communication has been one-way communication. Too often teachers think families “get it” and if they don’t get it, they will ask questions. However with linguistically diverse families, communication with schools can be very challenging (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012). So, establishing meaningful two-way communication can characterize effective home-school partnerships. Within the two-way communication there should be ways to learn about families and engage in family engagement practices that attend to families’ experiences, strengths, and needs (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012). It also uses language that is parent-friendly, and not using “educator jargon” that can be very formal and hard to understand.

### ***Connect to Learning***

Another important way to ensure ELL family engagement is to make sure that engagement also connects to what students are learning. This type of engagement calls for focused, systemic and sustainable approaches to family engagement (Lopez et al., 2011). What schools need to decide is what is their vision for ELL family engagement. Then when the vision is established, schools need to determine how to then ensure families, staff, and students have a common voice in establishing a common vision. An

important element to developing an engaging relationship with ELL families that is connected to learning is to focus on students' language development and language proficiency, because these students are learning both academic content and language. Connecting to learning, then requires support from school leaders, ample resources, frequent communication, and a shared vision for family engagement that helps students meet the demands of a 21st century education (Mapp, 2012).

### ***Making ELL Success a Priority***

There are districts in Minnesota and across the country that have ELL programs with sustained, successful parental engagement. What do they do to be successful? One important element is that school leaders make ELL success a priority in their district. Engaging ELL families can only work if all members of the community (administrators, staff, parents and students) are committed to the broader mission (Breiseth et al., 2011). This mission will be different for each district. However, once that mission is established, the benefits are huge. Engaged ELL parents possess depths of dedication and wisdom regarding their children and their culture. It's important for school leaders to see that the important question is not, "what can they learn from us?", but "what can we learn from each other?" (Breiseth et al., 2011, p. 3).

### **Traditional vs Nontraditional Models of ELL Parental Involvement**

A traditional model for ELL parental involvement offers suggestions for how parents can support student academic achievement within different contexts. One example of a traditional model is that of Epstein (as cited in Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012) described earlier in this chapter. Epstein indicated that an action team made up of

teachers, parents and administrators is essential to drive the implementation, development and monitoring of these practices. Many of these types of programs look at this model as a developmental model, with each strategy building upon the others. In order to accommodate the ELL families with this model, staff would need to embed cultural knowledge into the framework of their efforts (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012).

A nontraditional model of ELL parental involvement is based on developing a reciprocal understanding of schools and families (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012). They include parental empowerment as well as integration of community into school curriculum. In addition to having practices that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, developing ELL parental involvement includes supporting families, promoting communication and advocacy for empowerment (Freire, 2002). In this model, parental education includes both family literacy and understanding of the school community. Family literacy may involve teaching ELL parents how to read and write, then supporting them as they learn to create a home environment that promotes and supports reading and writing with their children. Another way to support ELL parents is for schools to do a better job of teaching parents about the U.S. education system. Parents must be provided with an understanding of the school community that is “historically situated in the mainstream culture dominated by white, middle class, English-speaking norms” (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012, p. 7). Integration of community into schools is when schools support ELL parental involvement opportunities by validating the knowledge of culture these parents bring with them. ELL parents should be collaborating with stakeholders as they work collectively to build a curriculum based on parental input.

## **Examples of Successful Nontraditional ELL Parental Partnerships**

### ***Parent Institute for Quality Education***

An example of community-based education provided to parents is the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) (Parent Institute for Quality Education, 2020). This program began in California in 1987 when a professor and a reverend in San Diego, concerned about the poor learning conditions of Latino students, worked together with a superintendent in their area to learn about parental concerns of the academic struggles of their students. From these discussions, this program began, which offers a nine-week parent involvement education program. Classes have been taught in 16 languages, and are provided by instructors trained by PIQE. Participating schools cover the \$200-\$300 cost per parent with funding from different grants, Title 1 money, etc. The classes teach the following:

- Establish and maintain a supportive home learning environment
- Communicate and collaborate with teachers, counselors and principals
- Navigate the school system and access its resources
- Encourage college attendance
- Identify and avoid obstacles to school success
- Support children's emotional and social development

Initial studies conducted after the program began reported its effectiveness in promoting parent participation in schools (Mardirosian & Ochoa, 1996). Recent findings show that the children of Latino parents who graduated from San Diego's PIQE program had a 93% graduation rate and 79.2% student enrollment in college. To date, more than 375,000



parents in multiple school districts across California have participated. The program has since moved to other parts of the country, graduating another 25,000 more parents (Sahafi & Vidano, 2007).

### ***Parent Mentors***

School districts that are actively involved in positively engaging ELL families also may have a parent mentor program. This program provides new ELL parents to the district with a parent mentor that speaks the language of the new family. Their job is to help the family with questions they may have, orient them to the school building and staff as well as interpreting for the family as needed. This parent mentor checks in on the family weekly either by phone or at the families home. The goal is to provide positive, welcoming outreach services to the family, that are built on trust and respect. Family communication always begins as positive and welcoming so that if there is a problem down the road that needs addressing, a positive relationship between the mentor and family has already been established (Brewster & Railsback, 2003).

### **An Example of a District That Has Sustained Collective Ownership**

California has the PIQE program that has been successful and even has a location now in Worthington, MN. Another district that is listening and responding positively to their ELL families needs is the Roseville, MN district. According to their website (Roseville School District, 2020), Roseville school district has over 1,200 students enrolled in their ELL program. The website also reported that these students represent 47 countries and 56 different languages are spoken in 26% of students' homes. They employ 16 cultural liaisons to work with the families in the district. According to the Roseville

school district website, they have 4 African American, 2 Native American cultural liaisons, 1 Hmong, 3 Karen, 4 Latino, 1 Nepali and 1 Somali. They also have recently, after parent feedback, launched individual Facebook pages dedicated to the multiple languages represented in their district. Each cultural liaison is responsible for updating the pages, which serve the purpose of providing school and community information in parents' home languages. Parents had communicated through various sources that they were not reading school websites (even if they were translated) nor were they listening to robo calls sent from the district office with various messages throughout the year.

Parents revealed that they got most of their information from Facebook. So, the staff reached out to see what information the parents were looking for and needing, and that is what is on the various Facebook pages. Also, according to the Roseville school district website, they have launched a district wide family involvement initiative. There is a deliberate and targeted design to this effort that emphasizes cultural and linguistic diversity and creates an equitable approach to meeting the needs of English learners. The website also states that, "a new parent involvement program called Family Connection Night launched in 2014. The program is designed to reach out to the diversity of families within the district. Following an interpreted general session, cultural specific small group sessions are held with interpreters. Parents are asked to share their perceptions of Roseville school and to indicate what they needed to help their children in school."

Roseville school district is a positive example of a school district that has realized that positive ELL family engagement happens through positive experiences and employing staff that are helpful and supportive of the ELL experience. This district has had sustained

participation with their ELL families and it is one that other school districts who don't have a similar program in place can use as an example of how to successfully engage ELL families in their various schools.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter contained a review of literature related to the topic of effective methods to reach and engage ELL families authentically which then leads to collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education. The first section examined the importance of family involvement in their students' education and how this directly affects students academic success. The second section reviewed the factors preventing positive engagement of ELL families in their children's schools, such as language barriers. Then it reviewed what needs to be done by schools before ELL families can begin to feel welcome and appreciated at their children's schools. This included building mutual trust between staff and parents, as well as parental confidence in their schools ability to teach their children with high academic standards. The final section reviewed what districts locally and across the U.S. are doing that have led to successful engagement of their Latino populations. This section also reviewed traditional and nontraditional parental involvement models used currently with school districts around the U.S.

Chapter Three provides the framework and rationale for the professional development project developed based on the research presented in Chapter Two. It also describes the audience and setting for the project. Last, Chapter Three includes a timeline

for completion of the project, how the effectiveness of the project is measured, and opportunities for professional development going forward.

Chapter Four is the concluding chapter of this capstone project. It includes the important learnings from my research and it revisits the literature that is most valuable to my project. It also includes the limitations of my project in my subject area as well as benefits to the profession.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

Chapter Three draws on research outlined in the literature review in Chapter Two regarding reasons why it is important for ELLs to have actively involved family members in their education and school communities, what reasons for families not to be engaged currently and outlining the most effective methods to engage multilingual families in their students' education and school communities. This project seeks to answer the following question: *What are the most effective methods to engage Latino families authentically to build collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education?* This chapter begins by providing a project overview, description, an outline of learning objectives of the project, rationale for the project, context for the project, which is followed by a project outline and timeline. A conclusion is provided with a summary of findings.

#### Project Overview

This project consists of three one-hour long professional development sessions for all staff in elementary and secondary schools. All staff are included in this voluntary professional development to help relay and practice upon the message regarding community building of our ELL families within each school. The professional development series will help expand on the research question, *What are the most effective methods to engage Latino families authentically to build collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education?*

## **Project Description**

### ***Setting***

The district where this project takes place is in a first ring suburb to a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. There are three English, International Baccalaureate elementary schools, and one Spanish Immersion elementary school, one middle school (6-8 grades) and one high school (9-12 grades) for a total of about 4,590 students. The current ELL population of the district is about 410 students, or 9% of the total population.

### ***Audience***

All staff is included in this professional development (PD) series. Staff includes classroom teachers, interventionists, specialists, paraprofessionals as well as office staff and instructional assistants. The goal is to provide participants with an interactive, adaptive PD workshop, that gives staff concrete, immediate feedback. It will also include ways in which they can contribute to helping Latino families build collective ownership in the school community.

### **Outline of Learning Objectives for Professional Development Series**

As stated in the introduction, this project helps answer the question: *What are the most effective methods to engage Latino families authentically to build collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education?* This project encompasses current practices already in place at the elementary setting, but enhances the adult learning by adding more options for educators to further build trust with their Latino families as well as educating and familiarizing immigrant parents with the U.S. education system. One of the goals of this project is to have the four elementary schools

in this first ring suburban district following the same protocols when it comes to engaging Latino families in their school communities. Currently, all four schools don't have the same programs in place to help ELL families engage in their school community. This project sets in place professional development that helps all staff, not just teaching staff to engage the Latino community specifically, but it is also developed for all families in the ELL community. The training helps staff with district-wide development that is cohesive and intentional in manner. The first part of the PD focuses on what is currently being done to effectively communicate with ELL families in the district. It asks staff to look inward, and think about what they believe being welcoming to our Latino families looks like to them. It looks at current challenges in effectively engaging Latino families in the district, and what we need to learn about our Latino families to help them feel welcome. This on-going training will look at a successful current monthly ELL parent meeting called *Bring it Home* that is already in place at one elementary. The goal is to have a similar meeting format set up and run by ELL staff and other teacher staff at the other three elementary schools, with plans to expand to secondary in the future. Part of the PD is about setting up the model for the meeting so that the ELL staff can take that meeting model and bring it back to their elementary school and set up a similar monthly meeting format for the ELL families. It also includes an introduction to our current ELL population in our district, describing the different populations, with a focus on the Latino population. Session one ends with the participants completing an exit ticket by answering the question, "what is one new thing you can do to help your Latino families feel welcome in your school?". The second session of the PD looks at ELL successes in other

districts around the state and country. It discusses what local and national districts are doing to engage their Latino families in their students' education. It introduces a new program called Parent Mentors that has had success in other districts across the country. The hope is that this program will be implemented in the near future. The final day in the PD series addresses common misconceptions about attitudes that staff have about immigrant parents, and how to improve on their attitudes towards our immigrant population. This will be an interactive PD, showing staff how each staff member plays an important role in helping to make parents feel welcome in their school community. It is emphasized that it starts with the first introduction with office staff, so that interaction needs to be positive. There will be time spent on how ELL students are identified in the district and how that process can be improved and streamlined. There is also time spent on better, more efficient communication from staff to families. This is interactive in that participants have the chance to review effective, concise communication with families in the form of rewriting emails to be more effective communication tools. This is a three-part, three day PD, all showing ways to encourage staff to work on building relationships with their Latino/ELL families, which ultimately will result in higher trust and more involvement with our ELL families in the school community.

### **Rationale**

Building positive relationships with families within a school community is the building blocks of success in school. I selected this project to add to the conversation of my research topic because it will require staff to reevaluate how they treat our immigrant families and if they see them as assets. On paper, talking about building positive



relationships with families is an obvious positive. However, when it comes down to asking yourself what you do to create a welcoming environment, staff may have very different ideas of what welcoming looks and feels like. An example of this was shared by a cultural liaison that works at a local high school. This person asked some of the staff if they wanted an “All are Welcome Here” sign for their classrooms. The person was surprised when one staff member said, “No thank you”. When asked why, the teacher said, “All my students know they are welcome here.” The liaison said, “How do you know that? Have you ever asked your students?” The teacher looked at the liaison blankly for a moment, but then replied that they had never asked the question. In the past, most teachers were in the business of education to teach students and share their knowledge. But that is not enough anymore. Teachers need to also be in the business of building relationships with students and families that may not look the same as them, believe the same things or even speak the same language. For these reasons (and many more) I have decided to pursue this very important and ongoing topic.

The paradigm that is guiding my work is that of Freire (2002) and Mezirow (2000). The purpose of this PD is *transformative*. In this paradigm, the desired outcome of my project work would be that of changing ways of seeing immigrants as detractors or negative aspects of successful school/parent relationships. Instead, with learning about the many ways that educators can build trusting relationships with their students' families, educators will see their families with equal intrinsic value to their nonimmigrant families. In order for transformation to occur, educators need to understand that they can be agents of change, but it starts with their own perceptions of what it means to be a welcoming,

trusting staff member. It will require educators to do some critical reflection on their roles in their classrooms and require an open dialogue amongst staff and parents (Baker et al., 2019).

The delivery of this professional development will be centered around the adult learning theory of *transformative learning* (TL) (Mezirow, 2000). This theory is often described as learning that changes the way individuals think about themselves and their world, and that involves a shift of consciousness. For example, ELLs often report a shift in their view of U.S. culture and in their view of themselves as they gain confidence communicating in a new language (Cycyk & Hammer, 2018). To Mezirow (2000), transformative learning is a rational process. As individuals reflect on and discuss their assumptions about the world, they often experience a shift in their frame of reference or world view. For this to happen, individuals engaging in reflective discourse need to challenge each others' assumptions and encourage group members to consider various perspectives. It is essential that participants engaging in reflective discourse have complete and accurate information about the topic for discussion, be free from bias, and meet in an environment of acceptance, empathy, and trust (Mezirow, 2000).

Mezirow (2000) emphasizes the need for critical reflection on our assumptions to determine whether the beliefs we have adopted through cultural assimilation align with our values and current practices. This project seeks to start with conversations about how our immigrant families are feeling about their school communities by having honest conversations with them about their experiences. It then will allow for educators to make changes in their approaches based on those conversations. Within the PD, the staff will be

able to see the data from parents as well as work on the tools to make positive changes in and outside their classrooms.

As demonstrated by research, many school districts in the U.S. struggle to have positive engagement with their immigrant families. This lack of positive engagement may then lead to students' lack of interest in school, graduation, and further education past high school. Thirty years of research has consistently linked family involvement to higher student achievement, better attitude toward school, lower dropout rates and increased community support for education as well as many other positive outcomes for students, families and schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, despite these findings, many schools struggle to actively engage high numbers of immigrant parents in their child's schooling (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Informed by the research findings outlined in Chapter Two, the rationale behind this project is to provide resources and protocols to help the ELL staff and district staff work as a team to utilize the ideas and plans presented in the PD workshop to have a more cohesive, intentional plan for developing relationships with immigrant families districtwide, and not school to school. This will allow the programs to be more seamless within each school, and allow staff to work together to help these programs succeed.

### **Context**

The purpose of my project is to help educators find meaningful ways to connect with Latino families (and all ELL families) during and outside of the school day. Building this connection between staff and families will help engage trust in the educators and show stakeholders (family members as well as members of the families

community) that they are important in their child's education and can contribute to their learning in many ways.

This project came to mind for many reasons. It started with personal experience when I was interpreting a Speech IEP meeting for a family from El Salvador. The parents shared with me before the meeting that they both had about a 4th grade education and they were very nervous to sit in front of the educators and understand what was being said. They were impressed and grateful for everything that was being offered to their child. They also shared that in their home country, these resources wouldn't have been available to them, and they knew their child's chances for a better life was in the U.S. I realized then and there that more needs to be done for our immigrant families. There are many opportunities for students in the U.S., but families need to know about them and understand them, but first they need to trust the people that are delivering the messages to them. Most of the time, these educators are white, middle class people. So, right away there may be some distrust. Building trust and also helping immigrant families understand the value they have by contributing to their students' education is necessary. For this project, I will be using the elementary setting that I work in currently. However, this project can also be used in a secondary setting. The main focus of this project is to provide multiple ways to help Latino families stay engaged and educated about their students schooling and build positive working relationships with staff at their children's schools.

### **Observed Needs**

In my work at my current school setting, which is a first ring suburb of a major

metropolitan area, there are many efforts to engage Latino families in their students' education and help them become more involved in their school communities. So, my project's purpose is to expand on the current practices by adding to what is already being done to support ELL families. Also to increase and improve on the immigration entrance process to the school system, tracking students once they are in the school system, and providing more assistance to parents that are new to the U.S. school system. One way to do this is to provide a monthly meeting for parents to learn from the ELL staff and other staff members about how to navigate the school system. Another way is to provide outside classes following the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) model mentioned in Chapter Two. The Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) is a non-profit, community-based organization that was founded in 1987. The mission of PIQE is to "connect families, schools and community as partners to advance the education of every child through parent engagement"(PIQE, 2020). To achieve its mission, PIQE partners with school districts and schools to offer programs that empower parents, enhance parental engagement, foster positive parent-school relationships, and promote civic responsibility to address social issues. PIQE primarily serves low-income communities and has offered its programs in 16 languages throughout 128 school districts in California (PIQE, 2020). In addition, through its Best Practices model, PIQE has worked with school districts in thirteen other states to implement parent engagement programs. Since its inception, PIQE has graduated over 721,000 parents from its Parent Engagement in Education Program (PIQE, 2020). The goal of this program is to inform parents on how to navigate the school system, while collaborating with teachers,

counselors, and principals to increase the likelihood of their children graduating from high school and enrolling in college. PIQE supports these efforts as early as Kindergarten, encouraging parents to provide their children with a supportive academic and social learning environment (PIQE, 2020). This program is set up through school districts community education programs, and is generally funded through grants and Title I funds. A third area to assist newcomer families is to assign a parent mentor to them. As mentioned in Chapter Two, parent mentor programs provide new immigrant parents with a parent mentor who speaks their language and is familiar and active in the school community. The mentor then gives the new parents a tour of the school, and introduces them to important members of the school staff, including the principal and other office staff members. This parent mentor then will check in to see how the family is doing throughout the year, helping out when they can and continuing to answer questions as they come up.

### **Project Outline and Timeline**

The resulting project is a professional development workshop. The workshop presents participants with a knowledge base regarding how our district is doing with regards to immigrant parent participation currently, and how that number should increase once the district-wide plans are implemented. The workshop will give staff specific strategies that can be incorporated immediately to help build immigrant parent participation within the school setting, whether it be traditional or nontraditional methods, as well as by helping staff improve communication with their Latino families.

## **Project Goals**

This project seeks to accomplish multiple goals in the professional development of mainstream elementary and English as a Second Language teachers as well as all staff who work with ELLs:

1. Develop an understanding and importance of why our immigrant parents are not more actively involved in their students' school. What are the main reasons for this trend?
2. Provide strategies to support parents interested in being more involved. What proven methods can we offer to parents as a district wide initiative to get more immigrant parents involved?
3. Provide action plans for implementation of the three main strategies offered during the workshop.
4. Provide a safe space for school staff to examine their possible bias of Latino families in our schools and then teach them how to provide an environment that encourages our Latino families to authentically engage with their school community.

## **Summary**

The professional development workshop outlined above seeks to give mainstream and ELL teachers the tools to work with ELL families to encourage more authentic engagement to ensure collective ownership in their school community. The main goals for this project are to support mainstream teachers in understanding their own bias regarding their ELL families and reasons why they are not participating actively in

school. Courageous conversations will help to understand how to build more trusting relationships with these families, to encourage more authentic engagement (Singleton, 2015).

The framework for this presentation is focused around Mezirow's theory of Transformative thinking. As individuals reflect on and discuss their assumptions about the world, they often experience a shift in their frame of reference or world view. For this to happen, individuals engaging in reflective discourse need to challenge each others' assumptions and encourage group members to consider various perspectives. It is essential that participants engaging in reflective discourse have complete and accurate information about the topic for discussion, be free from bias, and meet in an environment of acceptance, empathy, and trust (Mezirow, 2000). In a space of acceptance, free of bias, it will then push educators towards critical reflection on their practices and create a paradigm shift in approaches to the ELL community represented in the classroom and district.

Chapter Four provides an overall reflection on the project in its entirety. The chapter revisits the question: *What are the most effective methods to authentically engage Latino families to build collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education?*



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion/Reflection

#### Introduction

This capstone project was created to explore the guiding question, *What are the most effective methods to authentically engage Latino families to build collective ownership in their school communities and their students' education?* As an ELL teacher in a district that has a majority of their ELL population identified as Latino, as well as a wife to a native Mexican, and mom to children that are mixed, I felt compelled to increase staff awareness in how my district views Latino families. This is part of an equity journey that I have been on for the past few years. The district (and its employees) presented in my Capstone project also have been doing equity as well as anti-racist work over the last few years. The work has been highlighted using Glenn Singleton's *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (2015). Glenn Singleton's protocol is to follow the compass, which is thinking, believing, feeling and acting. Participants begin each equity professional development (PD) with identifying where they are on the compass. Also discussed are the six conditions, which are: 1. focus on what is personal, local and immediate; 2. isolate race; 3. normalize social construction and multiple perspectives; 4. monitor agreements and conditions; 5. use a working definition of race; and 6. examine the presence and role of "whiteness". While doing this equity work, all participants also understand the agreements which are: stay engaged, speak your truth, experience discomfort, and expect and accept non-closure. This work has become more important with the onslaught of race

issues that have been present in the United States over the past year, as well as the immigration issues that have been part of our local and national news. One of the goals of this project was to provide a safe space for school staff to examine their possible bias against Latinos in our schools and then teach them how to provide an environment that encourages our Latino families to authentically engage with their school community. Another goal was to present the inequities in our school system, which in turn would create urgency to understand and work towards eliminating the inequities. Then the PD series presented in my Capstone project would provide strategies to help create a more inclusive and equitable environment for our Latino families and students.

### **Learnings from the Project and Capstone**

The process of finishing my Masters has been one that I couldn't imagine. I have never worked so hard on anything in my life, and have never cared about the outcome of something I created so forcefully. This topic matters to me, and it should matter to everyone that works with families of immigrants, which is EVERYONE in education. I focused on Latinos because they are my family. I understand this culture of people better than any other culture, other than my own. My first major learning from this project is learning about and appreciating other cultures is important in education and in life. Understanding and appreciating the cultural differences that make up each individual school and school district is vital to having effective two-way communication between staff and families. This appreciation also helps build the trust that is needed in order for Latino families to feel safe and respected in their school community. But what is at the base of these building blocks of trust and communication is staff buy in. If staff does not

believe that trust and cultural appreciation is necessary to effectively communicate with their Latino families, then the blocks will fall.

A second major learning I have had throughout this process is working diligently at making my PD series one that colleagues will value and learn from. We as educators and staff spend a lot of time in PDs that are important, but don't add value or give immediate tools that staff can utilize right away. Many educators value data, which is important. However, I wanted my PD to also be interactive and have some take away value. I realized that the value in this PD is not about what I need to share and teach. It's about meeting participants where they are at, engaging in critical thinking and providing them with the steps to be better, to learn from each other and to hopefully positively alter how they are treating and engaging with our Latino families. Many PDs focus on the teachers in districts. I wanted to extend this PD to all staff in the school district from paraeducators to office staff to custodial staff. I want support staff to work right next to teachers and hopefully realize at the end of the PD series that their treatment and perceptions of Latinos (and all immigrants) in our schools affect how our families feel about engaging in their schools. If they are treated with respect and kindness from their first encounter with school staff, it will go a long way to help build trust between our Latino families and staff.

My third major learning is thinking of our Latino families (and all immigrant families) as assets to our district and individual schools, not deficits. I have heard many teachers complain over the years in frustration that they "can't get their immigrant families to participate in anything", "They never come to parent teacher conferences, or

family fun night or even return my calls or emails.” In many teachers' minds they are doing the right thing by reaching out and trying to communicate with their Latino families. But, what this Capstone project has shown me is that the message and possibly the messenger are not working. What needs to change is not the Latino families, it is the message that they are receiving. Many Latino families come from countries where family and community are all part of the decision making. They have a very collectivist mindset, where it is not about the individual, but the group and how the group will feel about making a decision. When collectivism meets the individualism coveted in the United States, the message gets muddled. What school staff need to start thinking about is how they can better communicate with their Latino families. What type of communication do the families want? Many will need interpreters to help with the message. So, even though that adds another layer to the communication, it is so important to make sure the messages are understood, and the culture is intact. To see our Latino families as assets, they need to be heard, and appreciated. They may have a different approach to education and communication, but everyone wants the same thing in the end. Everyone wants to have a positive relationship between staff and parents that ultimately benefits the students. Every parent wants to hear positive feedback about their child. They also want to have their feedback respected and appreciated.

Over the course of the nine months that this project has taken to complete, the world we live in has been blown apart by racial injustice, police brutality caught on camera, and a change of government. With this change, there is hope. Hope that the white people of this nation will finally see what some of the people of color in the U.S. have

endured since they were forced from their homes in Africa and became enslaved by the white people. The historical trauma that comes from those years and the trauma that ensued when slavery was abolished will continue to perpetuate our families of color until there is healing and reckoning. There has been great work done to revise the social studies curriculums to show the truth of our U.S history, not the watered-down versions that our forefathers wrote. With this hopeful change in mindset, this realization of white privilege, there is hope that we as a nation will see our brothers and sisters of color as equals. But, with much healing to come. Many of our Latino immigrants also have endured great strife and hardship to get to the U.S. Most want the same thing that all people want. They want to raise a family, have a good paying job, and have their children get an amazing education. This is something they may not have received in their countries, but they know that the U.S. will provide for their children. This Capstone was envisioned and developed with that in mind. There was a lot of literature written about the Latino experience in the U.S. and how to best communicate with and develop relationships with Latino families. I found myself many times getting lost in the literature, and emerging four hours later, on a completely different topic than when I started. The literature that I used in my research was vast and informative.

### **The Literature**

As I stated earlier, Latinos are my family. So, over the past few years, I have read many articles, books and websites related to the Latino experience in the U.S. and how to best support ELL students and families. While many of these sources have impacted my Capstone project in one way or another, there were a few sources that were influential.

One of the websites I found many sources in is called Colorin Colorado. This website is “*A bilingual site for educators and families of English Language learners*” (Colorin Colorado, 2021). The information on the website comes from accredited authors and professors in the field of English Language Learners, and has a very proactive approach to content. Some of the literature I reviewed from Colorin Colorado provided the most important information for this Capstone. For example, Baker et al., (2019) provided helpful information about seeing immigrants as assets in their school setting as well as the desired outcome of my project work would be that of changing ways of seeing immigrants as detractors or negative aspects of successful school/parent relationships. Instead, with learning about the many ways that educators can build trusting relationships with their students' families, educators will see their families with equal intrinsic value to their nonimmigrant families. In order for transformation to occur, educators need to understand that they can be agents of change, but it starts with their own perceptions of what it means to be a welcoming, trusting staff member. It will require educators to do some critical reflection on their roles in their classrooms and require an open dialogue amongst staff and parents.

While developing my project, I wanted to make sure that during the three days of my PD series, participants would feel comfortable to ask tough questions regarding bias and race of themselves and each other. This is not an easy task for people because it may require giving answers that you are not ready to admit. However, in order for transformation to occur, according to Mezirow's discussion of Transformation Theory, a critical reflection of one's own beliefs and assumptions must occur, as well as an

evaluation of their validity. These are all required for transformative learning to take place (Mezirow, 2000).

Over time in my educational experience, I have learned the importance of trust in any relationship. Never has this been more apparent than when I was working as a Special Education paraeducator, working with students that were under the umbrella of Social/Emotional, or what has been coined Emotional Behavioral Disability in the past. Many of the students under my care had dealt with childhood trauma that left them distrustful of authority and rules. So, any new relationship had to start slowly. Trust had to be built. I used a lot of humor with my students, joking with them, played card games and board games with them until the walls started to come down, and the trust started building. Some students took much longer than others to trust me, and to buy into the community my coworkers and I had built. This was much like the trust that is needed for our ELL community and educators. Many in the ELL community are distrustful of schools, or have had negative experiences of their own with regards to their schooling. So it is something where ELL families must believe that school personnel are qualified, fair and dependable and have their child's best interests at heart (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). A crucial first step in engaging Latino families (and any immigrant family) is to focus on building relationships of mutual trust, confidence and respect (Mapp, 2012). Mutual trust is also based on sustained positive interactions between parents and school staff, allowing for parents to be engaged as partners with their children's teachers. Trusting relationships consist of four qualities: respect, integrity, competence and personal regard (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Educators and families act towards one

another with integrity. They work together with a sense of competence by recognizing that everyone can contribute towards the common goal of supporting students. Lastly, educators and families demonstrate personal regard by genuinely caring for one another. Building trusting relationships takes time and effort, but it is worth it (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2012).

### **Limitations**

This project is meant to be an introduction to how to better communicate with Latino families and authentically engage them in their child's learning. However, it is not a one-and-done kind of idea. The purpose of this PD is to begin the process of better communication with different cultures represented in our school district. It is to show all staff that their attitudes and bias towards people from other cultures matters and needs to be shifted if it is negative. I have also learned how challenging it is to provide a comprehensive PD that includes a balance of interactive activities and meaningful dialogue. I would like a focal point of this PD to be the voices of our Latino community, but since writing this during a global pandemic, I have been limited to attempting to get opinions from people via zoom meetings and Google forms which is not as effective. What I would like to create when it is safe to do so, is audio recordings of parents speaking about their experiences in our district (positive and negative) for a really impactful experience. My goal is to present this during the 2021-2022 school year during workshop week to all elementary school staff.



### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

The goal of this Capstone project is to present to the elementary school staff to start. The goal is to present to the staff and go over what is necessary to streamline the process of identifying our ELL students with the same process throughout all four schools, as well as presenting and implementing the parent mentor program in all four elementary schools. After that, I plan to present the *Bring it Home* (BIH) model to the participants with the idea of developing the meeting format to go back to the three other elementary schools and have it be implemented by the BIH committees in each school, which would be formed after the PD series. Once the BIH model has been successfully implemented at all elementary schools, then the goal would be to present the PD series to secondary school staff (6-12 grades) with the further goal to have the ELL identification process streamlined K-12, have the parent mentoring program offered in all schools, as well as offering a district-wide BIH meeting format presented and implemented at all six schools in the district. Then the hope and goal is to further develop communication strategies to all our ELL families to authentically engage ELL families and work as a team to encourage participation in school in whatever format the families are able to participate with the end goal being higher student achievement and participation in school.

### **Benefit to the Profession**

My hope is that this project will be used by other school districts that are needing to learn how to better engage their Latino families in their students' education. In school districts that are white majority, there are still a large number of staff that don't

understand the damage they are doing in demanding “English only” mantra and assimilation to white culture, or really not understanding what it means to say “All are welcome here”. My intention is that this will be a learning opportunity that leads to more interest and discussion surrounding how our Latinos (and all immigrants) are being treated inside and outside the classroom.

### **Summary Reflection**

If everyone in this world would take the time to learn and appreciate where their neighbors come from, ask respectful questions when you don’t understand something, and appreciate that we are more similar than different, we would live in a better world. I know many will say that is pie in the sky thinking. But it can be done. I am proof that minds can be changed. I lived in a very white world growing up. I was upper middle class, went to a white majority high school and surrounded myself with white friends. It’s what I knew. It’s what I was comfortable with. I didn’t think about people of color. I didn’t think about why I only saw white faces on TV, and the only people of color I saw were in negative or servant roles. I didn’t question why my high school was mostly white, or that I got into college easily. However, something changed in me when I moved away to college. I continued to study Spanish, and had a native speaking professor tell me in order to really learn the language, I needed to immerse myself in the culture and language. That professor helped change my life. I moved to Guadalajara, Mexico for a semester, and my white bubble burst. I saw poverty like I have never seen before. People begging on the streets, in crowded buses, in stores. But I also saw joy, pride in culture, language and food like I had never experienced before. I met my now husband walking

home from school one day, and ended up moving to Mexico for three years after graduating from college. It is something I look back on now and really am amazed at how brave I was at 21 years old. I'm proud of that girl. So, my equity journey has led me here, writing this Capstone and realizing there is so much work to do. But, I have faith that if I can change my bias, and realize my white privilege and the choices which have led me exactly where I am today, then it can be done with anyone that is willing to be open to change. I have made many changes in my perceptions about people of color. I have worked hard at listening to people of color in my life and realizing everyone's story matters. Everyone's story has value and purpose and life behind it.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter Four provided a reflection on my capstone process as a whole. First the chapter provided a reflection of the major learnings of the capstone project. Then, it provided a revisit of the literature that was most impactful and relevant to how this Capstone was created. Next, Chapter Four explained the limitations of the project and suggestions for future development of the project's goals. Finally, Chapter Four discussed the benefits to the profession of this project, and the hope that the message is carried out to other districts that are needing support with communicating with our Latino families.

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