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Research Brief

Building Bridges Between Multilingual Families and Urban Schools; A qualitative case study

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Abstract

Long established ideals of parental engagement in schools should have been the gold standard for engagement, particularly for families that are culturally and linguistically diverse (Ishimaru, 2016). Social justice leadership (Furman 2012) emplores school leaders to challenge established practices and create school cultures that welcome and engage multilingual families. While Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth provides a framework for schools to identify the array of capital that multilingual families bring with them into the schools. To combat the barriers that families and schools often confront regarding parental engagement, this study highlights the work of bilingual counseling assistants (BCAs) as cultural brokers who bridge families, communities, and schools. While the analysis and data collection is ongoing, preliminary findings indicate the ways in which BCAs build upon the human capital of multilingual families in welcoming and acknowledging the cultural wealth they bring to schools. The significance of this qualitative study is that it elevates the work of BCAs as crucial members of the school staff despite working from the margins. Additionally, BCAs bridge multilingual families and schools through cultivating family-school-community partnerships.

Aim

This research seeks to elevate the work of bilingual counseling assistants (BCAs) as cultural brokers for multilingual families and the ways in which BCAs establish, cultivate, and facilitate family-school-community partnerships.

Problem

Research has shown that family engagement is key to student success (Epstein, 2010), however, research has shown that the idea of best practices for family engagement does not fully encompass the needs and engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families (Arauo, 2009; Auerbach, 2009, 2011; Baird, 2015). Often there are barriers that multilingual families face that preclude their engagement (Waterman & Harry, 2008; Beauregard et al, 2014; Morse, 1995; Valdes, 1996). Schools also face barriers to involvement with families (Caplan, 2000; Drake, 2000; Henderson et al, 2007). The adoption of a range of culturally responsive dispositions, approaches and methods to meaningfully engage multilingual families have been presented throughout the literature highlighted in this study.

In Pennsylvania, there are more than 61,000 English Learners (ELs) speaking more than 200 different languages. In Philadelphia, the services provided to English Language Learners or ELLs in the School District of Philadelphia, falls under The Office of Multilingual Curriculum and Programs or (OMCP). The OMCP office works with more than 15,000 ELLs who represent more than 130 countries and speak more than 100 home languages.

The School District of Philadelphia hires bilingual counseling assistants to "facilitate

cross-cultural communication between students, limited-English proficient families, and District staff by providing culturally relevant and linguistically competent translation and interpretation services" (School District of Philadelphia website). BCAs are assigned to schools based on the percentage of ELLs in the school and are always guaranteed to return to the same school the following academic year. The research sites in this study have large percentages of students/families who spoke Spanish, Mandarin and Burmese.

Research Study Design

This work is situated in two complementary theoretical frameworks, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework and Furman's (2012) social justice leadership framework. Together, these frameworks allow us to investigate multilingual family engagement in schools through the cultural brokering work of bilingual counseling assistants (BCAs). Community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005), is constructed of six cultural capitals: navigational, aspirational, linguistic, resistance, social, and familial which encompasses the forms of capital and the knowledge that Students of Color bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom. Furman's (2012) framework of social justice leadership dimensions conceptualizes leadership for social justice as praxis (a Friirian concept which integrates reflection and action) along five dimensions: personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic and ecological.

The research questions in this study were: what strategies are schools with high linguistic diversity using to communicate with and engage families and what strategies schools use to engage community partners? To answer those questions, one-hour interviews were conducted with a central office administrator, principals, lead ESL teachers and bilingual counseling assistants. In addition to interviews, focus group discussions were conducted at both Spruce and Walnut (pseudonyms) with Spanish-speaking families and Burmese families. A codebook was specifically designed to identify instances of community cultural wealth and social justice leadership.

A codebook based on concepts in community cultural wealth and social justice frameworks was constructed by the research team to identify exemplar quotes and develop reliability from the interview transcripts. The research team then coded additional interviews separately, then reconvened to exchange and discuss coding together.

Findings

While this research is presently ongoing, preliminary findings for this study indicate that the work of BCAs surpasses translating and interpretive services. BCAs build upon the "community cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2012) of multilingual families in welcoming and acknowledging the various forms of capital they bring to schools.

Implications

This research seeks to contribute to the field in two significant ways. First, this research

seeks to elevate the work of bilingual counseling assistants (BCAs) who serve multilingual families. BCAs are crucial members of the school staff, yet they occupy a marginal role within the school's leadership structure. As a bridge for multilingual families, BCAs establish, cultivate, and facilitate family-school-community partnerships. Secondly, this work seeks to contribute to existing literature through deepening studies regarding social justice leadership and highlighting the transformative influence of BCAs who adopt a social justice stance in their work.

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Author Biography

Janel N. Dia is a PhD student in the School of Education from Drexel University. A first generation college student, she earned her B.S. from Penn State University in Human Development and Family Studies. She earned her M.Ed.- TESOL from Eastern University. Janel is a research assistant for the School, Community, Family Engagement Project with Dr. Vera Lee, Dr. Kristine Lewis Grant, and Dr. Barbara Hoekje. Janel's research applies the frameworks of critical race theory to examine educational access and opportunities for communities of color and the ways in which they pursue educational equality.

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