

Mennonite Country: The Role of School Parent Liaisons and School Administrators Connecting With Immigrant Latino Families in North Central Indiana

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Abstract

This study examined the role of school personnel on the education of immigrant Latino families and their children in North Central Indiana. An ethnographic research design was used to examine the relationship between a Midwestern U.S. school district and immigrant families and its impact on the education of Latino children. Specifically, over the course of two years, 14 school personnel participated in the ethnography. Findings demonstrated that school parent liaisons were critical to developing a bridge between the schools and the immigrant Latino families and to the success of the children. Another important finding was that school administrators' proactive involvement in the education and lives of the immigrant Latino families and their children had resulted in a positive learning environment for the Latino children. Implications are provided for practice and policy.

Key Words: Latino immigrant families, educational success, parent liaisons

Introduction

The roads had been cleared, and the snow covered North Central Indiana on a cool, mid-January day. The second author had strolled the hallways of

the different elementary schools and the middle and high school for over two years learning about how immigrant Latino families and a school district in North Central Indiana were working together to promote the educational success of Latino children. His visits and work always brought him back to one of the elementary schools, which sat on top of a hill at the edge of town. Mrs. Brenda Ramirez had been the [school] parent liaison for over 12 years, and she was well known for her dedication to the families at this school and throughout the district. Brenda often shared her experiences as a parent liaison and how one had to be dedicated seven days a week throughout the year. She talked about how the other parent liaisons and she often provided familial, educational, and social outreach to the families. Unfortunately, North Central Indiana lost Mrs. Ramirez to a fatal car accident. Mrs. Ramirez had been an example of the relationship between the schools and the Latino community in Mennonite Country. (reflections from the second author)

It was not uncommon to read the different signs in front of the schools in both English and Spanish. Whether they were promoting summer school, a parent event, or an assembly, one would believe that this community was in the Southwest region of the United States; on the contrary, this small community was nestled in the Amish country of North Central Indiana. A cultural tapestry of European American Mennonites and Amish, other European Americans, and the Latino population had become commonplace for almost 20 years.

Mennonites are a group of Anabaptists who migrated to North America from Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries fleeing from religious persecution (Mennonite Church, USA, 1995). The connections between social justice, service, and faith is congruent with Mennonite doctrine. Based on their understanding of the teachings of the Bible, Mennonites believe that Christ calls them to work with the poor or marginalized people (Wolfer, 2011). They also believe that, as a church, they can be “an engine for social change in the world” (Wolfer, 2011, p. 154). Their internal personal beliefs translate into outward action for community transformation toward peace and justice. Specifically, the region in which this study took place had a long history of Mennonite outreach and service to the community. Some of the outreach activities that were led by Mennonites included offering English as a second language classes for adult immigrants, advocating for the rights of immigrants, providing urgent medical care for individuals without health insurance, and distributing food to low-income individuals and families. Their call to serve others had become an integral part of the school district’s culture as it attempted to develop a bridge between the Latino community, the schools, and the larger community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of (school) parent liaisons and school administrators in the education of immigrant Latino families and their children. Several research questions were explored: (1) What is the role of parent liaisons in the educational success of Latino children in Mennonite country? (2) How do parent liaisons serve as the bridge between the Latino community and the school system? (3) What is the role of school administrators in the educational success of immigrant Latino families and their children, and how did they work to enhance the relationship between the immigrant Latino families and the schools?

Immigrant Latinos and Indiana

Over the past two decades, the Latino immigrant population in the U.S. has grown significantly. Since the 1990s, the Latino presence in North Central Indiana began to grow. Most Latinos in that region emigrated from Central Mexico or other Latin American countries between 1990 and 2008 (Guzman, Jara, & Armet, 2011). The RV industry in Elkhart County drew many of these immigrant families which increased the Latino population by 15%.

The Latino population in Elkhart County was very young and comprised of primarily young couples, ranging from 24–40 years of age, with the majority having children under age 18 living at home. As a result, one of the school districts in North Central Indiana that was part of this study also experienced a tremendous growth of Latino children, who made up almost 40% of their total student body by 2010 (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). In 2015, this school district became the corporation with the highest percentage of Latino students in the state, comprising 51.5% of the total student body (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). This growth brought about unique opportunities as well as some challenges for schools and Latino families in the region.

Research conducted in new immigrant destinations, similar to the community where this study took place, showed that educators working in rural communities may be ill-equipped to work with the influx of Latino children and adolescents into their schools (Wortham & Contreras, 2002). They may also not be prepared to address barriers to academic and personal/social development, language needs, immigration status concerns, and working with parents who do not speak English. However, Latino parents report that teachers and schools willing to work with the Latino community are allies and contributors to the success of their children (Martinez & Martinez, 2002). In addition, schools can contribute to the educational experience of Latino children and make their environment more inviting by hiring bilingual staff and conducting different school activities in the parents' native language.

Latino Family Values and the American Educational Context

At the national level, Latino students have continued to perform less well than White students. For example, in 2008, the high school dropout rate for Latinos was 18.3% compared to 4.8% for White students. From 1990 to 2013, the high school dropout rate for Whites declined from 9% to 5%, and the rate for Latinos declined from 32% to 12%. As a result, the gap between Whites and Latinos decreased from 23% in 1990 to 7% in 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Specifically, the graduation rate for one of the school corporations in the study was 75.5% for Latinos and 87.7% for non-Latino Whites in 2009. However, by 2015 the graduation rate for Latinos increased by 10%, reaching an 85.5% graduation rate, while the graduation rate for non-Latino Whites dropped by approximately .2%, holding at an 85.3% graduation rate (Indiana Department of Education, n.d.). Thus, Latinos students in the school system surpassed the graduation rate of non-Latino Whites.

In 2009, 38.7% of Latino high school graduates ages 18–24 enrolled in colleges and universities, compared to 50.3% of non-Latino Whites (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Also, in 2009, approximately 13.2% of Latino adults had a college degree, compared to 29.9% of non-Latino Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Between 1990 and 2014, the percentage of individuals between the ages 25–29 years old who attained a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 8% to 15% for Latinos (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2014).

Despite the statistics and the challenges Latino families face, they have demonstrated resiliency through their values and beliefs. Among Latino families, *familismo*—a cultural, social, economic, and spiritual support network within and outside the family—serves as the foundation for Latino families (Delgado Gaitan, 1992). A major aspect of this value is the concept of *educación*, defined as being morally grounded. Children are expected to be respectful and cooperative with their teachers and peers (Delgado Gaitan, 1992). Furthermore, Latino children recognize the sacrifices their parents have made for them, which often serves as motivation to become high achievers in their education (Stacciarini, Smith, Garvan, Weins, & Cottler, 2015).

Although Latino families have demonstrated resilience through their social networks, the reality of cultural discontinuity between the schools and immigrant Latino families has continued (Habermehl, 2006). One of the main barriers for Latino families to become involved in their children's education is the misalignment of cultural values and beliefs between the parents and the school system (Habermehl, 2006; Stacciarini et al., 2015). Studies have confirmed that Latino parents have reported feeling unwelcome in schools

and have experienced various levels of racism and discrimination, especially in communities that are unfriendly to immigrant populations (Alexander, Cox, Behnke, & Larzefere, 2017; Stacciarini et al., 2015). Heightened fears of deportation make transportation a significant barrier for Latino family involvement in schools, as parents try to limit the amount of time spent driving to avoid unintended contact with the authorities (Alexander et al., 2017; Stacciarini et al., 2015). Lack of parental involvement can be perceived by school staff as parents not caring about their children's education, when in reality, the opposite is true (Alexander et al., 2017).

Family liaisons play an important role with Latino families, often serving as a “cultural brokers” between families and schools to help break down barriers. Family liaisons may be bilingual and are skilled at making families feel welcomed and valued in school settings, serving as a bridge for linguistic and cultural gaps (Dretzke & Rickers, 2016; Han & Love, 2015; Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007; Sanders, 2008). They help families uncover the “hidden curriculum” of schools and help them navigate a school system that is unfamiliar, empowering parents to become advocates for themselves and their children (Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007; Sanders, 2008). Family liaisons educate teachers and administrators about the cultural barriers that exist and help them improve their relationships with parents, often serving as an equally valuable resource for staff as they are for parents (Dretzke & Rickers, 2016; Howland et al., 2006; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007; Sanders, 2008). Research shows that family liaisons are effective in building trusting relationships with schools (Dretzke & Rickers, 2016; Howland et al., 2006; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007; Sanders, 2008). Parental involvement in school positively affects academic outcomes for children (Alexander et al., 2017) and is important to consider if schools intend to close the achievement and opportunity gaps that exist for Latino students.

Method

This study was part of a larger research project that examined how different ecological factors—including familial, social, educational, and economic—have impacted the lives of immigrant Latino families. The current study specifically explored the role of school personnel including (school) parent liaisons and school administrators on the education of immigrant Latino families and their children.

Participants

The school sample in this study was comprised of seven parent liaisons and seven principals. The parent liaisons ranged in age from 23–62, with most of them being between 23–30 years old. All the parent liaisons were female. Six of them were Latinas, specifically, four of Mexican background, one Puerto Rican, and one Columbian. The remaining liaison was European American. The liaisons varied in experience from 3–17 years and education from two years of college to a bachelor's degree. They worked in elementary, middle, and high schools. All the liaisons were Spanish–English bilinguals.

The seven principals were two females and five males and worked in elementary, middle, and high schools. They ranged in age from 37–64 years. All of them were European Americans, and they ranged in experience from five to over 20 years. They all had a master's degree or higher. Furthermore, because of the nature of on-site observations, the authors also observed and interacted with other school personnel including teachers, counselors, and nurses to better understand the role of the parent liaisons and school administrators in the education of Latino children.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The purpose of the ethnographic research design employed in this study was to provide a holistic understanding of the role of parent liaisons and school administrators in the education of Latino students. The first and second authors conducted observations of the parent liaisons' interactions with children, families, and other school personnel across two years. The parent liaisons and administrators were recruited as part of the larger study. Data were collected through interviews, on-site observations in the schools and community, and participation in school events (Creswell, 2003). Interviews were conducted in the language preferred (Spanish or English). The interviews were semi-structured, individual interviews and lasted approximately one hour. The interview protocol explored multiple ecological factors regarding the intersection between immigrant Latino families, schools, and communities. The protocol was based on the previous literature that focused on immigrant Latino families and school systems (Delgado Gaitan, 1992). The interviews addressed the relationship between the schools and the immigrant Latino families, cultural and language issues affecting the families and the schools, parental involvement, visibility of the schools in the Latino community, and the strengths and challenges of the families.

In the data collection process, the interviews with the parent liaisons and principals were conducted first and provided an introduction to the work the

schools were doing with the immigrant Latino families. This information informed the on-site observations and participation in school events. Data analysis focused on ecological factors in the school environment. The authors triangulated the observation and interview data with multiple school visits and follow-up conversations with the school liaisons and principals. Themes were identified through the analysis of the field notes and transcriptions of the interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The preliminary analysis was cross-checked with the liaisons and principals.

Findings

Four key themes emerged from the data. The first theme, “Building Trust,” revealed the critical role parent liaisons played in establishing and building relationships with Latino families that would foster trust between families and the schools. The second theme, “Connecting Families to School and Social Resources,” illustrated how liaisons connected families to needed resources. The third theme, “Cultural and Language Brokers,” identified the different ways liaisons acted as intermediaries. The fourth, “*Victorias y Batallas*” (Victories and Challenges), examined how school administrators worked toward the educational success of Latino children.

Building Trust

A critical aspect to the interrelationship between the immigrant Latino families and the schools was the role of the (school) parent liaisons. As observed by the first author over the course of two years, it was not uncommon to see the parent liaisons making every effort to establish and build relationships with the families that would foster trust between families and the schools. Parent liaisons understood that this building relationships and trust with the families was one challenging task, yet crucial to be effective in their position in working with Latino families. This was not unique to one particular school, rather it was common practice throughout the district. The parent liaisons utilized various strategies such as conducting home visits, calling parents personally to inform them about different school events, conducting outreach activities such as delivering Christmas gifts, and being available to families and listening to the difficulties they encountered. The trust that parent liaisons built over time with parents lasted even after their children had left the school to go on to middle school, high school, and beyond. One parent liaison described her experience:

The families know that they can call me at any time regardless of the day. I have been doing this job for over 10 years, and the families know that they can trust me. Even after the children have left our school and

entered middle and high school, I have let them know that I am available to help them. When I first arrived, I spoke Spanish with a different accent; I made it a point to learn the Mexican dialect and worked on my accent. I always encourage the parents to get involved in their children's education and that our school welcomes them.

Another parent liaison discussed how families would not come to school events at first, but after years of building trust, families would come to the different meetings and events:

I have been working with some of the families for almost 18 years. At first, when there were programs and events at the school, it was difficult because most families did not come. Now that the families are accustomed to working with me and the school, they attend the different events and meetings that the school holds. I call to let them know that there is an important event or meeting, and they make it a point to come and contact other families.

A third parent liaison also shared how she built trust with the families by conducting outreach activities such as delivering Christmas gifts to families in need and listening to the difficult realities families encountered. She stated:

On Christmas, I delivered gifts to families who may not be able to give their children anything this year. On the same day, I was on the phone all morning with a family listening to the mother talk about some difficult realities that she was dealing with her family...I always tell the families to get involved. We did a program last week, and we had more Latino families attend than the mainstream families. We have worked hard with the Latino families and their community to assure them that the school cares about their children.

Whether it was traveling with students to the Southwestern region of the U.S. to visit universities or participating in the birth of a child of one of the families, the parent liaisons were well known in the community for being on the "frontlines 24/7" in serving the families. The reputation of serving families that they had gained over time built a foundation of trust between Latino families and the schools, which impacted other school personnel and their efforts to work with the families and their children.

Connecting Families to School and Community Resources

The second theme that emerged from the study illustrated that another key role of the parent liaisons was to help families access school and social resources. The parent liaisons discussed that many of the families they served were low-income families who struggled to make ends meet. As a result, some

of these families could not afford to pay fees associated with school activities. Thus, it was important for the parent liaisons to link families to school resources, making it possible for children to participate in school activities regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. One of the parent liaisons described in the following quote her experience of helping one family access resources in the school so that a student could participate in band:

For example, one girl who was in sixth grade, and she is in eighth grade now—when she was in sixth grade, her mom told me, “We don’t have money, so I want to take her out of band.” So I asked, “Why don’t you want her to be in band?” I always try to understand what is happening. It turns out that the mom told me that they did not have money, and she could not afford to rent the band instrument. I told her that there were options, that the school could help her with that. We were able to work it out so that the mom would only pay the minimum.

This is an example of the critical role parent liaisons played in helping families access and utilize school resources, making it possible for children to participate in school activities. The parent liaisons understood that extracurricular activities contributed to the academic success of students.

In addition, parent liaisons also played a key role in connecting families to community resources. The parent liaisons that had been in the school district the longest described how their role changed over time. Initially, their jobs consisted of primarily serving as interpreters in the schools. As they gained trust with the families, they began to learn more about families’ needs. One of the parent liaisons described how her role as a parent liaison evolved overtime:

First, it was about “my child is sick,” then the phone calls started getting, “Well, we have to move because we don’t have enough money to pay,” then I help them connect with resources. So that’s my job—connecting people with resources. It can be with Medicaid, first is that, either food stamps or just Medicaid. I was helping them with their basic family needs.

In the quote above, the parent liaison described how she saw the importance of her role as connecting the family to community resources. Another parent liaison also described through the in-depth interviews how she helped a family obtain financial resources for a student’s cornea transplant. Thus, whether it was helping families apply for food stamps or Medicaid, find resources to pay their rent, obtain food from a food pantry, or seek other financial resources for medical care, the parent liaisons were known to help families meet their social and economic needs. The parent liaisons understood that the Latino children’s educational success was also impacted by contextual factors beyond the school setting. They saw the relationship between home factors and school success.

Thus, through observations and in-depth interviews, it was found that a key role of parent liaisons was connecting families to school and community resources, helping students succeed academically.

Cultural and Language Brokers

The third theme that emerged was that parent liaisons also served as cultural and language brokers for Latino families in the school system. The parent liaisons functioned as translators who not only provided interpretation services but also the expertise needed to work with Latino families. One liaison noted the educational experience needed to function as a liaison was its own skill separate from translation work. Across time, the district hired a translator in their central office who translated districtwide materials. At the school level, translation took much of the liaison's time. They became selective in what was translated, such as the principal's monthly newsletter or interpreting at large meetings of parents. Liaisons also played a pivotal role in helping parents learn the school terminology for reading levels and explained test scores to them. This information helped one parent understand their child's difficulties with reading during a parent-teacher conference.

While translation was a central aspect of the work, one liaison proposed that the central element of their work was to help and educate parents. This work included a different type of translation not limited to language, but which helped parents adjust to their new surroundings and learn about the new educational system. They helped parents transition through what one liaison termed "*un choque cultural constante*" or a constant cultural shock:

One child, I had last week that just came from Mexico...with no English. I try to check in to see how things are going, but it is more than just sitting here and learning the language—a brand new culture, brand new language, it's freezing outside; everything is new, so "*un choque cultural constante*."

This shock included unfamiliar extracurricular activities, security measures such as locking school doors, and even the hard-cold winters. One parent liaison started monthly meetings for parents of first graders who were struggling, providing them tools to work with their children. The teacher attended the meetings, but the parent liaison did the preparation and presentation.

An extracurricular activity unfamiliar to the parents discussed by one liaison was a Girl Scout group she started at the school:

[a parent wondered] "someone's going to be with my children? It's not going to cost me anything? And they're going to give them a snack? That sounded strange to me." That is when I had to explain to the parents that

yes, that's what we do through this organization. I saw a great change in the girls; the parents came and videorecorded. One of the barriers that I encountered was the language. The parents sometimes want to come and participate, and they don't know, but once they know the person [liaison], there is more communication.

Originally the girls were not participating as parents wondered who would take care of the girls and whether there were costs to the family. To gain the trust of parents and explain the program, the liaison went door-to-door requesting permission for the girls to participate. Once the girls started attending the meetings, their parents came for special events that they videorecorded. The liaison commented that, as a result of experiences like these, parents became more accustomed to visiting the school in spite of language barriers.

Parent liaisons occupied a variety of roles in the school and in their work with families, including serving as a member of a school collaborative team that reviewed cases of individual students. The liaisons contributed their knowledge of the families at these meetings and offered their services as mediators between the school and community. One liaison in particular clearly recognized the variety of roles she occupied and was familiar with the terminology used in schools as a result of her social work background. She advocated for families, connected them to community resources, and offered advice and counsel to both the parents and children. For example, she advised parents regarding the disciplining of their kids.

***Victorias y Batallas* (Victories and Challenges)**

The fourth major theme that emerged from this research was *Victorias y Batallas*, which explored the victories and challenges experienced in the school district in the effort to serve Latino students and their families. Interviews and observations of school administrators revealed that the school system had experienced success in serving Latino children and their families over the last 20 years. The school district leaders at all levels were very proactive before the community began to experience a demographic shift. Administrators continued to look to the future to make improvements and overcome some of the challenges they faced in serving the Latino population.

Administrators were very supportive of programming and services that were culturally appropriate and benefited the Latino community. Among the services they provided for Latino families, the overwhelming majority of the administrators expressed the view that one of their most important triumphs had been the success of the (school) parent liaisons. In an interview with one of the school administrators, he stated:

She is probably the biggest triumph we have had. She is our greatest strength among our support staff and in general when it comes to the ELL population when it comes to our school district. She is like the grandmother. She has been around; I first met her in ELL in the early 90s. She has been here in the community, and so she knows what is going on with the families. Not just my school, but across the board. She is our greatest strength.

Similar to this administrator, most school leaders also emphasized that the parent liaisons had been a great asset to their schools. As reported by all the school administrators and noted through observation by the first and second authors, the parent liaisons were seen as a critical link between the school district in the study and the Latino community. As reported by the school administrators, Latino families felt more comfortable in coming to the school and the family involvement had begun to increase overall as a result of the liaisons' bridge-building efforts.

Overall, one of the school districts examined in the study had many victories over the years; however, administrators acknowledged that they needed to make improvement in different areas. For example, for the most part, the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) did not reflect school demographics. Research has demonstrated that Latino and other multicultural families do not get involved in the PTO because they do not believe that they belong (Viramontez Anguiano, 2004). In one of the communities in the study, linguistic challenges, cultural barriers, and the lack of knowledge about the school system were among the factors preventing Latino families from being involved in some of the events in the schools. School administrators were trying to work with the parent liaisons to help increase the participation of the families in all the different school events. One school administrator expressed her concern and hope for participation:

Our parent liaisons have been great to work with. Some Latino families are very involved, but I know one goal is we want to find ways to: number one, communicate better; number two, to involve families better, and the bottom line is some of our programs don't reflect our demographics. Like, we have half Hispanic families, but then we don't see half involvement. That should match up; we would think. Our PTO should represent our demographics of our school.

As a result of administrators' commitment to address these cultural and linguistic challenges, true efforts to develop partnerships with the Latino community were undertaken. The goal was to develop programming that was Latino-centric and culturally appropriate and that went beyond merely

providing translation services. Thus, the school partnered with the Latino community to promote family involvement and make more culturally appropriate programming for children and their families. At the elementary level, the parent liaisons, teachers, and the Latino community worked with the fourth and fifth grade students in setting goals for the future, encouraging success in the classroom and participation in extracurricular activities, preparing for the standardized exam in Indiana (ISTEP), and preparing for their transition to middle school. At the middle school level, the programming focused on career exploration, preparation for high school, and understanding the benefits of college.

One of the most important successes for this community and the North Central Indiana region was an initiative to help Latino families better understand the preparation process for going to college. One of the key administrators at the high school level realized the importance of this culturally specific programming and was very supportive of this event. The event, coupled with follow-up meetings with the families, was very successful in both the first and second year of the program. Almost 300 individuals came to this event, many prestigious public and private universities were present, and students received over a million dollars in scholarships from these institutions. As a result of the success of this Latino-centric programming, other administrators in the area were open to having similar events in their schools that targeted the Latino families and their children's educational success.

Another concern that the administrators expressed was that most of the Latino students were not in the honor classes in middle school and then were not in the advancement placement (AP) and international baccalaureate (IB) courses in high school. This was apparent for the second author when he was invited to attend an honors banquet for high school students. The number of Latinos in attendance was very low, and the number of Latino males was even lower. The key leaders of a school district in the study recognized this as a problem, and they believed that they should strive to improve this issue. When interviewed, one of the administrators expressed this concern:

Don't get me wrong, I think the honors dinner is a great event; however, I have a real concern that there were very few Latinos honored this year in the different grades, and even less in the 11th–12th grades. I do see that the Latina numbers are higher in the honors classes and in the IB program; however, my goal is to see more. I am really concerned about not seeing Latino boys in the honors classes and IB program. I see all the potential in the boys, but they are not succeeding. I struggle with this because at the elementary level, I see the Latino boys being on the honor roll, but something happens before they get to high school. I see for different reasons they lose motivation, and sometimes they get in trouble.

This is one my biggest struggles as I want to see the Latino girls and boys succeed. I want to work to see their success. I want to see more boys succeed like the Latino boy who was honored tonight for being one of the highest ranked students in his senior class.

Research shows that schools in every U.S. region have struggled with partnerships with Latino families and their communities because of the cultural and linguistic barriers (Viramontez Anguiano & Lopez, 2012); however, in this region, school leaders were out to change that. School leaders in this study, across the board from the central office to every level of leadership, had the foresight to serve the Latino population and develop a relationship 20 years ago, even before they had a large influx of Latino students. School leaders in the region were open to multiculturalism and believed that it was important to prepare the next generation of Latinos to be successful. As a result of their efforts in elementary through high school, this high school in North Central Indiana that served Latinos was highly ranked by *The U.S. News and World Report*, being recognized as one of the top 10% of high schools in the nation. This triumph was celebrated in the Latino community as they saw their children obtaining a quality education.

Discussion

Classic scholarship by Delgado Gaitan on the interface between schools and immigrant Latino families and their communities has found that the fragile ecological relationship between schools—including teachers, school administrators, and other school personnel—and Latino families is critical for the educational success of Latino children (Delgado Gaitan, 2001). In the current study, this relationship had developed over the course of the 20 years since the Latino population had begun to grow significantly in the region. Moreover, as documented through the ethnography, the (school) parent liaisons and school administrators demonstrated that they were dedicated to the educational success of immigrant Latino families and their children.

The first major finding that emerged, *building trust*, was evidenced by all the parent liaison respondents reporting how difficult it was to forge a partnership between the families and the schools. However, as demonstrated in the data, the parent liaisons explained that despite the difficulties of doing social and educational outreach, they had developed trust with the Latino families and their children, serving as a foundation for their work and the work of other personnel with Latino families. Similarly, previous findings have found that when schools have developed a formative relationship with Latino families, the

school environment tended to be more conducive to learning for the Latino children (Delgado Gaitan, 2001). This finding is also consistent with previous research that shows that family liaisons are effective in helping build trusting relationships between families and schools, positively influencing the educational success of Latino children (Dretzke & Rickers, 2016; Sanders, 2008).

In addition to working in the schools, in the second theme it was found that liaisons connected families to school and social resources and contributed to the families' overall well-being which supported students' educational success. Families had limited economic resources and were unfamiliar with school-related expenses such as required fees for extracurricular activities. The parent liaisons helped families locate the needed economic resources for the fees because they recognized the importance of students' participation in extracurricular activities. The role of the liaisons in helping locate resources for school-based and other needs developed across time as they got to know the families better. One liaison described the process of mutual familiarity starting with translating for families, to gaining the trust of the families, to learning more about family needs, to families communicating their economic and medical needs to the liaisons, to the liaisons taking on the additional role of resource locator. The liaisons provided this type of help to support the families and to help ensure the students had what they needed to continue their schooling.

The findings on the parent liaisons' role as *cultural and language brokers* illustrated the complex role that liaisons assumed that extended beyond functioning as merely linguistic translators. They functioned as cultural brokers who helped parents learn how schools operated in general as well as the particular ways that instruction took place. The families also found themselves in an entirely unfamiliar environment represented by the long, cold winters of northern Indiana and where they encountered extracurricular activities that were new to many of them. The liaisons served as guides to both the students and parents in this new cultural, geographic, and educational context by drawing upon their work knowledge, experience living in the U.S., and skills that went beyond the English language, including how to obtain school and social resources. This finding is also congruent with previous research findings that show that family liaisons play an important role with Latino families, often serving as "cultural brokers" between families and schools to help break down barriers (Dretzke & Rickers, 2016; Han & Love, 2015; Howland et al., 2006; Martinez-Cosio & Martinez Iannacone, 2007; Sanders, 2008).

The findings concerning *victorias y batallas* (victories and battles) clearly illustrated that school administrators were deeply committed to encouraging the immigrant Latino families to participate at all levels of their children's education. Another key aspect of this finding, as observed through multiple interactions

with the administrators and agreed upon by the majority of them, was that there needed to be more Latino-centric, culturally appropriate programming that could promote the partnership between the Latino community and the school to enhance the educational success of Latino children. These findings were in agreement with previous research showing that school leaders who promote more holistic-based avenues for diversity have had more success with culturally and linguistically diverse families and their children (Griffith, 2001).

One major aspect that the administrators at every level agreed upon was the educational gap between Latino students and European American students. Most administrators said they wanted to see more Latino students in the honors and IB programs. Finally, through multiple observations and interactions, the authors saw that the administrators and other school personnel including teachers, counselors, and others were concerned about an even wider academic gap between the Latino girls and boys especially at the middle and high school levels. The present research reinforces the finding that Latino girls outscore Latino boys at every level in other regions of the U.S. (Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005).

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of this study was the utilization of the ethnographic method that provided a thorough window of understanding about the school system and how the (school) parent liaisons and school administrators worked to improve the education of Latino children. The 25 years of experience accumulated by the first and second authors in the schools served as a bridge to create a relationship between the researchers, the schools, and the families. The researchers' fluency in Spanish and their understanding of the different Latino cultures served as strengths. Allowing administrators and personnel to participate in this study and their support for researchers to explore the school system were also critical to the success of the study.

A limitation of the study was that the authors were not able to explore the role of the school counselors and their relationship with the parent liaisons and how they served Latino families and Latino children. Another limitation was that the authors were not able to explore in greater detail how other neighboring school districts worked with Latino families and their children.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our research, focusing on a population of immigrant Latino families, their children, and their schools, provides a clear example of the importance of personal commitment to the educational, developmental, family, and community

needs of one of the fastest growing population groups in America. Strong leadership along with caring and competent service providers can clearly go a long way to addressing the educational and other needs of Latinos just as they can for other populations of children.

However, it is important to note that *policies* in individual schools, local communities, and school districts, as well as at state and national levels, are essential to maximizing the positive effects resulting from the intense personal commitment evidenced in this ethnographic study. Policies interact with and support the kind of intense effort and commitment exhibited by individuals who worked with us in this ethnographic study. Specifically, the foresight that school leadership had to develop inclusive policies that championed Latino culture and the strengths of changing demographics were critical to the success of Latino students in the region.

As shown by this research, school personnel, social workers, and other professionals who provide services to Latino families and children should work in partnership with schools to develop programs for Latino parents to inform them about the school curriculum, the educational system, and preparation for college. Another implication from this research is that school districts should continue to develop partnerships with Latino communities and leaders to help diminish extant educational gaps. To ensure best practice with Latino families, school personnel would benefit from explicit, rather than *ad hoc*, policies aimed at specific groups of students.

Additional research exploring how schools can help develop the capacity of Latino parents to be leaders in their schools is needed. One way to do this is to develop clear, focused policies, apply them, and then assess their usefulness in an ongoing manner. This approach would likely increase the continuity of practice for Latinos, as it would for other groups of families and children.

Conclusion

As our nation's schools continue to become increasingly diverse with Latino children numbering 1 out of 5 students in the classroom (Fry & Gonzales, 2008), it is critical to understand how school personnel can impact the education of Latino families and their children. In summary, the present study evidences the strengths of parent liaisons in schools and how they serve as an important bridge between immigrant Latino families and the schools. Moreover, the current research further documents that school leaders at all levels can be proactive in serving immigrant Latino families and their children despite the ecological challenges they may face. As such, this study provides valuable insight into how school personnel can work towards culturally competent practices when serving Latino populations. Finally, this study enhances the

literature by providing important insights into how to better research and serve Latino families in educational settings.

Endnotes

¹The term European American is used for this study, rather than White, because this region of the U.S. seems to have more members of subgroups still identifying with their respective European countries of origin compared to other regions.

²The larger study was conducted across two years by the first and second authors who have a combined 25 years of experience working with Latino families. The full sample consisted of 40 Latino families (63 parents). Findings from the larger study may be found in Lopez and Viramontez Anguiano (2013) and Viramontez Anguiano and Lopez (2012). A subsample of these families was included in this study.

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