

# Supporting the Engagement and Participation of Multicultural, Multilingual Immigrant Families in Public Education in the United States: Some Practical Strategies

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## Abstract

Over the past century in the U.S., stronger parental involvement in children's education has been encouraged and, more recently, codified into state teaching standards. Despite this, fully engaging parents as equal and respected partners has remained elusive. The quest seems particularly perplexing when attempting to enhance participation of immigrant parents who are emergent bi/multilingual learners (EBLs). To foster their enhanced engagement, strong collaborative partnerships among families, schools, and communities are essential. One way of doing so is by first reflecting on any existing institutionalized barriers or internalized biases that could be thwarting fuller participation, then creating school- and community-based activities where school personnel, immigrant families, and other families in the community can come together, work collaboratively, and share resources, capital, and cultural wealth. In addition to sharing resources in mutually beneficial ways, the goal of these collaborations is to promote trust, understanding, and empathy by getting to know one another on a personal level. This essay is grounded in Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (1995) and the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2006) and proposes a variety of collaborative endeavors—from professional development events for school personnel to intergenerational bilingual classes to community fairs in the schools—to build relationships and engage immigrant parents with the public schools. Modifying the proposed activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact is also addressed.

Key Words: school-community coalitions, parental engagement, immigrants, English language learners, parents, family, families

## Introduction

Throughout the history of public education in the United States, engaging parents in their children's education has oscillated from strong parental involvement during colonial times to lesser involvement during the "bureaucratic factory model schools of the industrial revolution" (Hiatt-Michael, 2001, p. 256) of the mid-1800s. From 1900 onward, parental involvement became more paramount in public schooling, and more recently, family and community engagement with public schools has been codified in statewide teaching standards. For example, the New York State Teaching Standards (New York State Education Department, 2011) assert that public school teachers should engage with the community to develop a "common culture" that promotes high learning expectations for all students where teachers and the community collaborate and share resources. Specifically, teachers should offer guidance and direction to families and guardians to help them participate more fully in the education of their children. Since community engagement has become an expectation in public schools, Hands (2005) asserted that universities should offer education majors preservice coursework on philosophies and approaches of partnering with families and communities. Similarly, Haddix (2015) argued that university-based teacher training programs should embrace a "community-engaged teaching agenda" that "demands transformative teacher practice that is essential in insuring optimal learning outcomes for all students" (p. 70). Part of implementing this teaching and community engagement agenda involves unpacking our own internalized biases. Consequently, Haddix (2015) would posit that preservice preparation for teachers and in-service professional development (PD) for all school personnel should challenge "deficit and oppressive frameworks" (p. 70) so we can more fully engage with our students, their families, and their communities by honoring their lived experiences and current realities.

Despite these established teaching standards and the documented benefits on attendance, achievement levels, and positive attitudes toward school with enhanced parental involvement (Vera et al., 2012), fully engaging parents and the community in authentic, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways appears to be a perennial challenge for most local school districts. Attempting to enhance the participation of racialized and minoritized immigrant parents who are emergent bi/multilingual learners (EBLs) appears to be especially challenging. I see this conundrum through a different lens due to my positionality as a

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) professional who has worked exclusively with adult EBLs in the community. Given this context as an educator and advocate for adult EBLs for over 20 years and a licensed social worker with 30-plus years of experience, I am more familiar with the perspectives of immigrant parents and their communities than with the public schools and their personnel because the public schools' students are generally the children of my students. From this professional experience, I have learned that many adult EBLs feel intimidated to enter public schools and ill-equipped to engage with school personnel because of either a real or perceived lack of English language proficiency and/or reluctance to ask for interpreters (Yol, 2019). In addition to linguistic concerns, they can also feel overwhelmed by the complex bureaucratic rules and regulations that govern public education, especially services related to EBLs or special education services if such support is warranted (Birman et al., 2007; Shiffman, 2019). An overarching unfamiliarity with American culture, especially the norms and culture of public schools, can act as another barrier to fuller participation in their children's education (Sibley & Dearing, 2014; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Vera et al., 2012; Yol, 2019). Similarly, the mores in their countries of origin might discourage parental involvement as "interference" in their children's education, viewing it as an arena that should be left exclusively in the hands of trained experts. Thus, parental involvement may be a "cultural incongruity" for immigrant EBL parents (Vera et al., 2012, p. 186). This reticence can be particularly intense for immigrant parents who have experienced significant interruptions or limited formal education (Magro, 2008) and thus feel that they lack the required knowledge base and skills to support and further their children's education.

Because of these challenges, strong partnerships and clear communication among families, schools, and communities are vital to immigrants (Campano et al., 2016; Hong, 2011; Olivos, 2012; Shiffman, 2019; Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015) and, according to Sibley and Brabeck (2017), will likely have the greatest impact on the educational outcomes for immigrant youth. The research literature has long established that immigrant, refugee, and other racial/ethnic/linguistic minority parents value education and have high academic aspirations and expectations for their children (Luna & Martinez, 2012; Sibley & Dearing, 2014), often greater than U.S.-born parents, so "the myth that parents of EL [English learner] children simply do not value education seems to be without merit" (Vera et al., 2012, p. 186). How immigrant parents respond to requests for engagement, however, may be different from their White, middle-class counterparts (Kim, 2009; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015). This reality, echoed in my own professional experience, raises these pivotal questions: If minoritized parents' devotion to their children's

education is no different from other parents, why aren't they participating in their children's schools voluntarily (Kim, 2009) or more extensively? Is their more "invisible" involvement in their children's education at home or in the community (e.g., reading aloud, checking homework, taking children to the library, encouraging aspirations for academic achievement and postsecondary success, etc.) overlooked or dismissed (Jeynes, 2003; Luna & Martinez, 2012)? How can the cultural capital of immigrant students and their families be leveraged to promote student success and inspire high educational expectations for immigrant students among school personnel (Luna & Martinez, 2012; Sibley & Dearing, 2014; Vera et al., 2012)? The potential answers are more complex than what these simple questions might suggest and require that educators understand immigrant parents' cultural differences and life experiences, then mobilize often underutilized community resources to promote parental involvement with the schools and their children's learning (Vera et al., 2012).

As Dr. Fischer Gray suggested, an important starting point is empathizing with the parents you hope to engage:

Find out what is keeping parents away. Don't assume it is because they are not interested. If you can galvanize parents and community members who speak the home languages to reach marginalized populations on their turf through home visits, churches, and community spaces, you will figure out how to best build school-home bridges for your district. (Dr. Fischer Gray, superintendent of Parkrose School District, as quoted in Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015, p. 132)

In other words, districts, school leaders, and teachers must move from blaming minoritized parents for their lack of involvement to examining how institutional bias and other barriers related to race, gender, socioeconomic class, immigration status, home languages (L1), and/or English-language proficiency might be obstructing fuller participation of immigrant parents in public schools (Kim, 2009; Olivos, 2012; Turney & Kao, 2009). Given the degree to which deficit and oppressive thinking towards racialized and minoritized people permeates American society (García & Guerra, 2004), these biases can also be unconsciously codified within existing school policies, practices, and outreach efforts, which could further exacerbate parental apathy and thwart more authentic parental engagement (Kim, 2009; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Shiffman, 2019). In addition to unpacking their own biases (Roy, 2018), school administrators and teachers must explicitly state that parental involvement in their children's schools and education are societal norms and expectations in the U.S. and must provide clear guidance regarding what parents can do specifically to foster their children's academic achievement. Similarly, creating

realistic, appropriate, and welcoming spaces for minoritized parents to participate (Kim, 2009; Shiffman, 2019; Vera et al., 2012) and demolishing any “structural and cultural barriers” (Sibley & Dearing, 2014, p. 827) to this fuller participation (Yol, 2019) are other ways to foster immigrant parents’ enhanced engagement with the schools. Otherwise, minoritized parents could easily feel that their input and participation are neither welcomed (Peña, 2000) nor valued (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001).

To enhance engagement of immigrant parents, schools must make “relationship” and “pragmatic” investments by getting to know families and children well (Sibley & Dearing, 2014, p. 828) and “working in collaboration with parents as opposed to a more paternalistic approach where parents are told what to do” (Vera et al., 2012, p. 198). For example, being mindful that the individualistic and more competitive practices in the United States may lie counter to the more collectivist, collaborative, and relationship-oriented cultural practices of many immigrant families is a critical first step (Luna & Martinez, 2012; Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2009; Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008). These “traditional” American practices will likely need to be modified and more non-traditional approaches attempted to increase immigrant parents’ involvement in public schools and to foster their children’s achievement and success. The Bridging Cultures Project (WestEd, n.d.) is an excellent resource to help teachers and administrators develop the mindset and skills required to meet their immigrant students and their families “halfway” in order to promote student success and parental engagement (see Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2009; Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008).

Tarasawa and Waggoner (2015) posited that more strengths-based, inclusive strategies that are communicated clearly and multilingually and engage *each and every* parent as an equal and respected partner can promote parental engagement. They continued that such “bridge building” must “enlist trusted community members and organizations...and inform parents about school expectations and values” so they can become knowledgeable and “active advocates for their children” (p. 131). Kim (2009) and Shiffman (2019) affirmed that creating welcoming, respectful spaces by removing barriers and effectively communicating with parents of immigrant youth to become engaged participants in their children’s schools and education must be the foundation of these partnerships and is especially crucial given the current zeitgeist of nativist, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric evidenced globally. Birman et al. (2007) argued that, since schools in the United States expect parental involvement, school communities have a tremendous opportunity to build these bridges between the “worlds of the family and school in ways that do not stigmatize the family or child” (p. 14) and should see immigrant families as

resources that “bring a range of diverse experiences to enrich the school setting” (p. 14). Approaching immigrant parents from a place of humility and respect will do much to engender the trust necessary to build meaningful, equitable, and mutually beneficial relationships.

One way of demonstrating respect is by honoring and valuing the strength and resilience of immigrant families and countering the misperception that immigrant students’ underachievement is related to insufficient parental concern and involvement. Shiffman (2019) posited that parents who are adult EBLs need “to feel welcome, to feel informed, to feel that their culture is really valued...to have this expectation and belief that they can help” (p. 27). Realizing that not all parents can become involved in schools and communities in the same ways, school personnel should not pathologize immigrant parents’ nor their perceived lack of involvement but instead be empathetic to these parents’ daily realities, including any socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic barriers they may be experiencing (Campano et al., 2016; Georgis et al., 2014; Hong, 2011; Tarawasa & Waggoner, 2015; Turney & Kao, 2009). School personnel may need to step outside of their usual practices and comfort zones by providing bilingual interpreters who facilitate the building of relationships between parents and school personnel (Vera et al., 2012) and by flexibly programming and scheduling to accommodate immigrant parents, especially those who are EBLs, including longer time slots for parent-teacher conferences (Georgis et al., 2014; Shiffman, 2019; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015; Yol, 2019). When school leaders like Superintendent Gray, quoted above, have scheduled events that are sensitive to religious and cultural observances as well as addressing potential economic, familial, and cultural barriers by providing free food, child care, transportation services, and events on school grounds, parental involvement and engagement has improved (Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015).

### **Multiple and Competing Perspectives of Engaging Immigrant Parents Who Are EBLs**

Clearly, students and their parents, both of whom are often EBLs, have a vested interest in engagement with the schools in the hopes of fostering their own personal growth and boosting their educational and vocational opportunities. The question, however, remains: Do the schools, their personnel, and the community value the presence and participation of immigrant students and their families, or are these students and families seen, consciously or unconsciously, as a “drain” on limited resources who “take attention away from” the “more deserving” native-born, English-speaking children? Until mutual respect, understanding, and trust are cultivated and until inclusive, reciprocal participation is sought among all stakeholders, an impasse will likely

persist. This impasse may intensify due to the economic impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and decisions regarding where to allocate increasingly limited resources.

Whether the proposed activities that follow are implemented in whole or in part, collaboration and reciprocity must be their guiding tenets. Fundamentally, the guiding question should be: How can the proposed activities be designed and actualized to benefit all stakeholders and create a synergistic power-sharing that will transform the overall quality of life and standard of living for the entire community? What, if any, fundraising or business–school partnerships are necessary? Can existing community and volunteer resources be leveraged to implement these activities? Clearly, the proposed activities will need to be coordinated effectively among the public schools, the adult and family literacy English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs (Shiffman, 2019), and other community resources (Vera et al., 2012) in each district. The overarching goal should be to make the school a welcoming space for the community and its immigrant members as well as to integrate the school, its personnel, and its resources into the fabric of the surrounding community, including among its often diverse, immigrant constituents. Ideally, the schools should become a viable, indispensable resource and an integral part of the community, and immigrant parents should be valued, honored, and seen as respected assets for the community, including its schools.

The varied and multifaceted family–school–community engagement programs I propose are informed by my review of the programs and strategies detailed in the extant research literature (see, e.g., Campano et al., 2016; DeNicolò et al., 2015; Haddix, 2015; Hong, 2011; Kim, 2009; Rosado et al., 2015; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015), my own educational and professional development experiences, and my personal reflection, rumination, and imagination. Though grounded in the research literature, this is not a research study but an essay to provoke discussion and dialogue about proposed activities and their feasibility and merits. The activities are intentionally not context-specific, so they can be adapted to a variety of educational settings that serve immigrant parents who are EBLs. This inherent flexibility in their design should be informed by seeking the input and perspectives of the participants targeted for the program or intervention so it is tailored to the unique conditions or circumstances of the specific students, families, school, and community. Out of respect for the coalition of family–school–community participants, the activities proposed should be both school- and community-based, but, since the primary goals are to make schools more welcoming to immigrant parents and others in the surrounding community and to foster enhanced parental involvement in their children’s learning through schools themselves, most of the

suggested activities will occur on the premises of public schools. The activities will also need to be modified due to the current virtual realities required to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, including the need for physical distancing, face coverings, and strict hygiene practices as well as the reliance on accessible and dependable internet-based technology.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Since the primary goal of family–school–community partnerships is to foster each and every student’s success and achievement in school, the theoretical underpinnings of this essay and discussion lie in Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence (1995), which elucidates the role that such partnerships can play in helping students feel supported and motivated to do well in school. In addition, I am using the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2006) as the conceptual framework for this discussion as others have (DeNicolo et al., 2015; Luna & Martinez, 2012). This model uses critical race theory (CRT) to confront traditional interpretations of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) and replaces the deficit perspectives held towards communities of color in the schools, including immigrant communities, with strengths-based positions that foreground the “array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts” (Luna & Martinez, 2012, p. 2) of marginalized groups that are often not recognized, acknowledged, leveraged, or celebrated to foster academic achievement and success in mainstream schools. Minoritized and racialized communities use these *aspirational* (daring to dream despite persistent inequities), *linguistic* (the intellectual and social skills derived from being bi- or multilingual), *familial* (the strength drawn from extended family and community history, pride, and memory), *social* (contacts, social networks, and community resources), and *navigational* (ability to outmaneuver institutions that have historically excluded them) *assets*, as well as *capital*, known as cultural wealth, to resist, endure, and survive oppression and discrimination and to challenge inequity or, as Yosso (2005) would posit, develop *resistance capital*. Ultimately, this model challenges us to overcome our own biases and prejudices (Roy, 2018) and leverage the *resistance capital* already existing among communities of color to restructure institutions in the U.S., including its educational institutions (PreK through postsecondary), so they become more representative, inclusive, equitable, and just for all.

### Positionality and Terminology

I have already shared my positionality as a social worker and TESOL professional who has worked with adult, immigrant EBLs, their families, and



communities for many years. In addition, inspired and affirmed by the work of Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015) and Colombo, Tigert, and Leider (2019), I prefer the term, *emergent bil/multilingual learner*, because it acknowledges immigrants' full linguistic repertoires, challenges the hegemony of English, and counters the pervasive deficit models in educational contexts in the U.S. surrounding students learning English as an additional language. Similarly, I prefer discussing learning English as an *additional* versus *second* language because many of our immigrant students and families are already bi- or multilingual. Finally, since race, gender, culture, and immigration status are social or legal constructs with often derogatory connotations and dire consequences, I prefer the terms *minoritized* and *racialized* because they confront White supremacy and other oppressive dynamics that have been sadly emblematic of this country since its founding. Fundamentally, there is nothing inherently “inferior” or “less than” about the people so labeled. Even from a statistical perspective (with its roots in eugenics), many schools are majority students of color, so “minority” in a numerical sense would also be inaccurate. As Roy (2018) asserted, White teachers have a responsibility to acknowledge, own, and unpack their White status and “recognize, identify, and disrupt ways current pedagogical practices and curricula privilege White, European histories, practices, and experiences as the primary narrative” (p. xi). These internalized, often unconscious and unquestioned biases also inform our educational policies and practices, which impact how our immigrant students and their families are invited to participate in our schools.

### **Importance of Administrative, Staff, and Community Buy-In and Support**

Even if the will exists to build bridges among schools, teachers, community organizations, and parents who are adult EBLs, successful partnerships must be “collaborative activities between individuals in schools and the surrounding communities” that “are characterized by efforts of all parties toward mutually desirable goals that are unattainable in the absence of cooperation” (Hands, 2005, p. 66, citing Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). Moving from teacher-initiated efforts to inclusive, cooperative endeavors requires the buy-in and support of school superintendents, principals, and other supervisory staff as well as program administrators of community agencies (e.g., adult and family literacy ESOL programs, other organizations). School administrators and their staff must be open to having parents and outside organizations use their spaces by cultivating a “joining process” (Mapp, 2003) within the school for educational and community-building activities to occur. Likewise, administrators, staff,

and teachers of family literacy programs and other community resources must welcome school personnel into their spaces to promote this cross-pollination of knowledge and resources.

Although the implementation of these proposed activities would likely occur during the academic year for the public schools (typically September to June), the preparation and coalition building required would need to begin well in advance of implementation among organizations and agencies with whom the programs ideally already have relationship. Since mutual trust and respect are essential with any collaborative effort, strong relationships must be evidenced among all stakeholders, and such relationships simply take time to cultivate and build. There is no uniform formula or recipe for developing these relationships because each school district and community has its unique histories and circumstances. Effective partnerships are also based on clear, concise, mutually agreed-upon plans that are characterized by reciprocity, flexibility, and robust personal networks (Hands, 2005) in order to implement activities that are effective and yield the desired impact (Shiffman, 2019; Yol, 2019).

## **Community-Based Activities**

The community-based activities proposed will focus on adult and family literacy programs and the public libraries nestled within the community as points of coalition-building among immigrant parents who are EBLs, public schools, and community resources.

### **Outreach to Adult and Family Literacy ESOL Programs**

This family–school–community collaboration could have school personnel do presentations, bi/multilingually if need be, to immigrant parents in family literacy ESOL programs. After all, many parents who are EBLs enter adult ESOL classes specifically to become more involved in their children’s educations, including engaging more fully and independently with the children’s schools (Shiffman, 2019). These presentations could address topics such as (a) applying to middle/high schools and colleges; (b) how the educational system operates in the U.S., particularly public schools; (c) school resources, especially interpreters, parent coordinators, and parent–teacher organizations; (d) appropriate community resources germane to immigrant families; and (e) expectations regarding parental involvement and engagement with schools and their children’s education by linking them to appropriate school- or community-based activities and events. These presentations should be done in culturally responsive and sustaining ways (Paris & Alim, 2017) that incorporate “language ambassadors” or “bicultural agents” from the school who can act as cultural and

language brokers for the parents (Shiffman, 2019). Having trained interpreters is not only required by federal law but is also critical in building relationships between immigrant parents and school personnel. School personnel (and the interpreters themselves) also need to be trained to ensure the interpreters remain inconspicuous, so the communication is between the parents and the school personnel and not the interpreter and the parents (Gardner, 2019). Excellent resources for training interpreters include Cross Cultural Communications ([www.cultureandlanguage.net](http://www.cultureandlanguage.net)) and for school interpreters specifically, SeSo, Inc. ([www.sesoincga.org](http://www.sesoincga.org)).

Equally important is to be flexible with the timing of informational meetings as most family literacy programs occur in the evening or on weekends. Providing a meal, snack, and childcare could also lessen the socioeconomic burden experienced by many immigrant parents and act as a gesture of goodwill that will build community (Georgis et al., 2014). This particular activity could easily be modified to an online/virtual format, which would also address the concern about the timing of presentations. The challenge is to ensure that the immigrant families have access to adequate technological support to participate in the interactive online format, especially with more limited access to public libraries and other public “hot spots” due to COVID-19 closures.

### **Leveraging Libraries to Promote Intergenerational Family Literacy**

Because “libraries are free, trusted, safe, and welcoming places in virtually every community that can help counterbalance [societal] inequities” (Lopez et al., 2016, p. 1), staff can often address issues of equity and access for immigrant families, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; however, community libraries are often an underutilized resource. Martinez (2008) found that librarians understood the “importance of forming home, school, and community partnerships” (p. 103) to nurture success in school and expressed a commitment to expanding their outreach efforts to the “neediest populations” (p. 102) in their communities. If hiring additional instructors to teach intergenerational bilingual classes proves cost-prohibitive, perhaps using existing staff and resources in community libraries could promote bi/multilingual family literacy. Providing opportunities for “young dual-language learners” as they “maintain their native [or heritage] language while also learning English” supports family engagement and participation in their children’s education (Lopez et al., 2016, p. 4). Even less formalized and structured classes can promote the development of bilingual skills from early childhood onward (Barac et al., 2014) and can foster school success via stronger executive-control skills and the ability to understand and respect perspectives not their own (Conboy et al., 2015) as well as nurture positive attitudes toward school and

learning (Domina, 2005). Haddix (2015) found success in supporting literacy and the creative expression of minoritized students by offering free writing workshops at local community organizations and public libraries. Ultimately, these workshops accessed “the voices of individuals often ignored as active agents in their own learning” (p. 67) and encouraged them to become more self-sufficient and autonomous learners. The philosophical underpinnings and pedagogical goals of Haddix’s writing workshops are akin to those of the Stories to Our Children program detailed below and the intergenerational bilingual classes proposed later.

One library-based project, the Stories to Our Children program, was co-sponsored by a university teacher preparation program, a school district, and community volunteers in the southwestern U.S. (Rosado et al., 2015). The goal of the project was to address the dearth of authentic, culturally relevant literature for the Latino children in the community. This six-week program was developed on the premise that “sharing stories, in writing or orally, can create a lasting bond between parents and their children” (p. 75), where “learning [together] is nurtured and passed from one generation to the next” (p. 88). The parents and some of their children were tasked with becoming authors and given support as they crafted 77 stories and poems, with most written only in Spanish, some written only in English, and others bilingually. Using a free publishing software program, volunteers from the university and community, in collaboration with library personnel, typed the stories, added corresponding illustrations, and prepared the compiled manuscript for publication. In the end, each author was given a copy of the book, and there was a book-signing celebration in the library where the original handwritten stories were displayed. In addition to leaving with a signed copy of the collective manuscript, the EBL authors left the program with a renewed sense of agency, cultural and linguistic identity, and pride (p. 88, citing Strommen & Mates, 2011) and the library augmented its collection of culturally responsive literary materials. The use of volunteers and sharing existing community resources also makes this activity more cost-efficient and viable.

### **School-Based Activities**

As mentioned previously, the focus of these engagement activities will be those offered on school premises, so crossing the thresholds of public schools becomes the norm for immigrant parents. The school-based activities proposed will focus on different formats of PD for school personnel, intergenerational bilingual classes, community fairs at the school, and conversation/work groups that bring immigrant and nonimmigrant parents together.

## Professional Development for School Personnel

One activity or series of activities that could humanize the interactions and build relationships among school staff and immigrant parents who are EBLs and enhance parental engagement are professional development activities (Bermudez & Padron, 1987; Grinberg & Goldfarb, 1998; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002) that feature the parents and their children prominently. After all, one major goal of reaching out to parents should be reducing misunderstanding and conflict with school personnel by educating staff about the immigrant parents' cultures and expectations (Sohn & Wang, 2006) and bringing the voices of immigrant parents into the consciousness and decision-making process of the school (Georgis et al., 2014).

### *Testimonials From Immigrant Parents With Guided Discussions*

With the guidance, support, and collaboration of community-based family literacy ESOL programs, a “speakers bureau” of immigrant parents could be developed. Given the power of narrative and the use of personal testimonials, or “*testimonios*” in Spanish (Campano et al., 2016), creating a professional development activity for all school personnel—from security guards, cafeteria staff, teachers, and principals to other administrative and support staff—that centers on adult immigrant EBLs whose children attend the school could be a compelling first step. Nonimmigrant parents should also be invited to attend in the hopes of identifying and building consensus related to common concerns and misconceptions shared among all parents in the school and to dismantling any “us–them” mentality that might exist. Having a diverse group of parents share their immigration stories about settling and creating a life in the U.S. and negotiating the public school system, including any challenges and obstacles encountered, might foster understanding and empathy.

Following parent testimonials, small group discussions could be facilitated by teachers and staff from the family literacy ESOL programs that the parents attend (for moral support) with one of the parent testimonial presenters and other nonimmigrant parents in each group. In this way, parents and school personnel can come to know one another on an interpersonal level through a facilitated conversation. By asking questions of interest, concern, and respectful curiosity of one another, school personnel and nonimmigrant parents can learn more about the other parents' experiences as immigrants, and each parent could gain understanding about school culture in the U.S. One “table topic” could be clearly explaining the often-complicated rules, regulations, and policies that govern the administration of public schools and untangling services for EBLs who are in the process of acquiring English as a fundamental starting point (Berger, 2000, as cited in Yol, 2019). In this way, the parents can gain needed insights and knowledge about public schools and use the power of their

lived experience to develop more authentic relationships with school personnel (Sohn & Wang, 2006) and other parents. Similarly, the immigrant parents could foster more confidence in their ability to communicate openly and “from the heart” in English and identify areas of common concern with the nonimmigrant parents that could be addressed in their conversation/work groups as discussed below.

### *Online Video Modules*

For adult immigrant EBLs who might lack the confidence in their language proficiency or are simply terrified of speaking in public to a large group of people whom they see as their social superiors, videotaping might be an easier way for their stories to be told. Videotaping could occur in a private, familiar location and subsequently be edited for content and consistency. The beauty of videotaping is that, with the parents’ consent, the video can be uploaded to an online platform or shared more widely for use in other public educational or academic venues, including meetings of the parent–teacher organization. Another benefit of videotaping is scheduling, as professional development events for public school personnel might occur during hours that are inconvenient for immigrant parents to attend due to their work, family, and/or childrearing responsibilities. Similarly, staff and other parents could view the videos at their leisure then come together for facilitated discussions in person or online. The flexibility of this technology respects the busy, complicated lives of immigrant parents, other parents, and school personnel alike while creating a space for the immigrant parents’ counterdiscourses (Fraser, 1992) to challenge the existing status quo and spark needed social and educational policy change. This activity is tailor-made to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and its mandates around physical distancing.

### *Dramatic Presentations From Immigrant Students*

Inspired by the innovative educational programming of the Roundabout Theater Company (n.d.), another professional development activity for school personnel and the parent–teacher organization that could promote educational justice and equity revolves around dramatic presentations conceived and produced by multicultural groups of students. Similar to the *testimonios* advocated for by Campano et al. (2016) and DeNicolo et al. (2015), these presentations could showcase participants’ immigration to the U.S., their emerging multilingual and multicultural identities, and their experience as students in public schools. Following the presentation, there could be a brief question, answer, and discussion period for school personnel and parents in attendance to inquire about the students’ creative process in the hopes of understanding their backstories and daily lives outside of school more authentically. Often, the use of art,

literature, and drama can spark more soul searching and introspection and be more impactful and transformative than direct confrontation or informational lectures. In this way, school personnel and parents in the community can experience children they see every day in a different light and more fully appreciate the children's "community cultural wealth" (Parmegiani, 2019; Yosso, 2005, 2006) in their roles as cultural ambassadors and language brokers for their families and communities. The use of the students' full linguistic repertoire or translanguaging (Otheguy et al., 2015) in these dramatic presentations might inspire teachers and other school personnel to leverage students' existing bi/multilingual capabilities and social/cultural capital from outside the classroom to help them acquire academic literacy and other discipline content knowledge in English (Parmegiani, 2019). These dramatic presentations would be appropriate for upper elementary through high school students as well as in postsecondary settings for instructors, staff, and faculty. From my own experience, I know that such student-inspired dramatic presentations have occurred at the community college level with great success and profound impact. This activity could also be easily adapted to an interactive, online/virtual format to address concerns about COVID-related physical distancing. A software platform like Zoom or Google Meet even allows for the creation of break-out groups.

In sum, the goal of these PD activities should be to highlight our common humanity and struggles and to reinforce the importance of getting to know each student or parent as an individual. This promotes fair, equitable, and differentiated treatment and access to opportunities for everyone, regardless of immigration status or home language.

### **Intergenerational Bilingual Classes at the School**

Brown (2011) argued that public schools, as a microcosm of the larger society, should aim for bi/multilingualism and bi/multiliteracy as social justice and equity issues because encouraging "people with different ethnic and language backgrounds to be who they are...enriches [a pluralistic] society with multiculturalism" (p. 36). If students' lived experience is honored and their bi/multilingualism and bi/multiliteracy are valued and appreciated, children of all ages "will be less likely to shun communication in their mother tongue" (Brown, 2011, p. 36).

Since family literacy interventions have been found to increase parental involvement in schools (Vera et al., 2012, citing Freeman & Freeman, 2007 and Olsen, 1997), another way of enhancing parental engagement and maintaining students' home/heritage language from PreK through secondary school and helping immigrant parents learn English and understand American culture and society is through intergenerational bilingual or "family literacy" (Sohn &

Wang, 2006, p. 131) classes hosted in the school. Such a school-based program would validate the school's commitment to honoring all community members by creating a welcoming environment for multilingual immigrant parents and addressing a potential obstacle to their more authentic participation in their children's education. Having higher English language proficiency will also help immigrant parents function more autonomously in the community and provide them with more educational and vocational opportunities. Similarly, promoting the maintenance of the home/heritage languages at an academic level will confront the "subtractive bilingualism" that can occur when children are promoted to English-only classes as quickly as possible.

Fundamentally, intergenerational bilingual classes will enable parents to showcase mastery of their home/heritage languages, instill a sense of cultural pride in their children, and affirm the value and marketability of bi/multiliteracy and bi/multiculturalism in an interconnected world and global economy (Poza et al., 2014). This degree of parental involvement in their children's education will promote positive attitudes toward lifelong learning and assist with any younger children's behavioral adjustments to school (Domina, 2005). Similarly, such classes can also attempt to equalize the children's rapid adjustment to the new culture and language and the typically slower acculturation process for their parents. Phinney (1990) called this difference in adjustment between parents and children "acculturation gaps" and Hwang and Wood (2009) "acculturative family distancing." Any unaddressed "acculturation gap" can potentially add stress to family relationships by making the family unit feel less cohesive, which, in turn, could compromise the children's mental health, sense of identity, and the executive functioning skills required for success in school.

In my work in family literacy ESOL programs, I have found that children love to "show off" what they know and help their parents learn English. Additionally, research in second language acquisition cites the importance of developing academic literacy in students' L1 to enhance additional language acquisition (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Much like the ESOL classes described in Campano et al. (2016), helping parents learn at least functional English to negotiate the school system, engage in parent-teacher conferences, and advocate for their children is essential (Shiffman, 2019). Acquiring academic literacy in English, at least basic reading and writing, is also crucial for immigrant parents to have more vocational opportunities and to enjoy a higher standard of living in the U.S. Many parents may have experienced limited or interrupted formal education (SIFE), so classes in their L1 would be a good way to enhance parents' L1 literacy skills, which, in turn, can ultimately enhance their English-language acquisition. Similarly, such classes would help children develop higher levels of literacy in their home/heritage



languages, which will promote their academic bi/multiliteracy. Learning together will also foster stronger bonds between parents and children as they both endure and ideally overcome the “culture shock” that can accompany adjusting to a new country, society, and culture. As mentioned above, this type of instruction could also address “subtractive bilingualism” while explicitly honoring, respecting, and fostering fluency in languages other than English, which would also send a strong message to the monolingual English-speaking students in the school. Perhaps they, too, might see the value and be inspired to learn and acquire a language other than English.

These classes would require bilingual teachers who can teach in the students’ (parents and children) L1 and English with equal facility. These classes would promote functional bilingualism/biliteracy by building on their students’ existing strengths and using inclusive pedagogical approaches like translanguaging (Otheguy et al., 2015; Parmegiani, 2019). Parents can showcase their literacy skills in their L1, and children can showcase their English language skills, so each can support the other in fostering academic bilingualism and biliteracy. In addition to future vocational and educational access and achievements, higher levels of bi/multiliteracy could also enhance families’ civic participation.

Scheduling the classes would need to occur outside of school hours and accommodate immigrant parents’ work schedules, family responsibilities, and religious practices. Perhaps childcare for children too young to participate in the classes and food could be provided to help mitigate the socioeconomic realities and time constraints of many immigrant parents. A free to low-cost way of providing childcare could be to create service-learning projects for older students in the school district who have an interest in caring for children or working in early childhood education. Homework assignments from the classes should promote collaboration between public school students and their parents to cultivate intergenerational understanding and respect. This shared academic work could also nurture enhanced parental involvement in the children’s schools. The activities should also be age-appropriate for children and mindful of the parents’ language proficiency and educational and academic backgrounds. Provided that immigrant families have the requisite technology and access to the internet in their homes, these classes could also be easily adapted to an online/virtual format and would address many of the obstacles listed above (need for childcare, transportation, etc.).

Having the instructors of these intergenerational bilingual classes partner with special education and immigrant-serving agencies and organizations in the community is also important. As Birman et al. (2007) asserted, “without valid, culturally sensitive assessments available in the immigrant student’s native language, it is impossible to determine whether the child’s [or parent’s] difficulties

are due to cultural adjustment or disabilities and to arrive at a definitive diagnosis” (p. 15). Finding trained professionals to conduct psychoeducational assessments or provide other services bi/multilingually, including mental health support, may prove challenging but is crucial in reducing potential miscommunication (Shiffman, 2019). Fostering and sustaining connections with trained, bi/multilingual professionals is another area worthy for immigrant family–school–community collaboration and activism.

### **Conversation/Community-Service Groups With Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Parents**

Immigrant families are not the only ones who can feel unwelcome and “face considerable sociocultural barriers to educational involvement” (Sibley & Dearing, 2014, p. 816). Many American-born parents—especially parents of color or low income—faced discrimination in their own schooling experience, often feel mistrust of school personnel and apprehension about becoming equal educational partners, and can thus be similarly reluctant to enact what they feel is “interfering” in their children’s education at school (Sibley & Dearing, 2014). In addition to the ways that nonimmigrant and monolingual English-speaking parents were incorporated into other suggested activities, this activity focuses on bringing all parents in the school together around areas of common concern.

Consistent with adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2015), adult EBLs are typically more pragmatic and appreciate the “immediacy of application” (Hanstock, 2004, p. 81) of practicing and improving the language they have acquired in “real life” situations. In my experience, I have found adult EBLs love conversation groups where they can practice speaking and communicating with native speakers of English in authentic, not contrived, ways. By forming these conversation/community-service groups, all parents in the school, with interpreters if need be, can join forces around areas of common concern or address an unmet need or neglected area in the school or community. For example, perhaps the parents could organize the community, including their children, to clean the school’s playground or the areas surrounding the school or to maintain and mend malfunctioning equipment on a weekly basis or to paint murals inside and outside the school that represent their diverse multicultural/multilingual community. Perhaps the availability of fresh produce is scarce in the surrounding community. Inspired by former First Lady, Michelle Obama, and resources like Kids Gardening and their excellent 2016 guide on “Starting a Community Garden on School Grounds,” the parents could organize and oversee a community garden whose produce could be used in the school cafeteria, sold to the community, or distributed to local food pantries. Other community-service ideas could include organizing visits, performances,

or game days at the local senior center or nursing home to promote intergenerational understanding and to attend to a population that is often overlooked and isolated in the community. Organizing a food drive and delivery of food packages and meals to homebound sick and elderly is another way of building an inclusive sense of community. Collecting donations with notes from the children to send to military personnel serving overseas or collecting donations for a worthy charitable organization would be other viable community-service options. Volunteering at the local animal shelter where the children and parents could learn how to care for animals, walk the dogs, or do basic obedience training could be yet another viable community-service opportunity. For more ambitious community members, doing the preliminary training for service animals or therapy pets is another way of helping those in need in the community. Provided there is access to the internet and other required technology, the conversation component of this activity could be modified to an online/remote format. Some of the community service activities might need more adjustment (e.g., delivering meals to the homebound elderly in a contactless way or interacting with them via computer or cell phone software instead of in person) or be limited or thwarted entirely due to the needs for physical distancing required to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

### **Community Fairs at the School**

Having schools host community resource fairs on their premises that feature organizations and agencies that cater to the needs and concerns of immigrant families would communicate to immigrant families and their children that they are respected and valued as essential parts of the school community and that their psychosocial and survival needs and concerns are legitimate and merit appropriate and timely interventions. Going to a school versus to agencies in the community known to provide immigration services could destigmatize the process and protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the families and children involved, especially those who are fearful of publicly revealing or accessing services due to a precarious immigration status. Agencies at the fair could include specific immigrant and refugee-serving agencies that support families' safe and successful transition to the U.S. and organizations that provide free or low-cost bi/multilingual child care; assessment for public benefits, like Medicaid, state-sponsored health programs, and food stamps; and referrals to free or low-cost medical, dental, and mental health services. Other multilingual social service providers, such as those providing culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate vocational training, job placement, and domestic violence services, should also be included. Given the current reality of capricious and unpredictable arrests and deportations, providing access to trustworthy bi/multilingual

legal services around immigration issues would convey that all families are welcome in the school, regardless of immigration or documentation status. This access to sound legal counsel and referrals to agencies that assist in emergency planning should one or both parents be deported has become urgent, especially in “mixed status” families where one or both parents are undocumented and the children are American citizens. If need be, these community fairs could become a montage of video clips from a variety of organizations and presented via an online format.

Expanding beyond the occasional community fair to a more comprehensive and consistently available alternative, many communities provide holistic “wraparound family support” (Georgis et al., 2014, p. 24), especially to immigrant students and their families, through community schools. Community schools are grounded in the research literature (Davies, 1993; Desimone et al., 2000; Georgis et al., 2014; Stefanski et al., 2016) and can become the “one-stop, safe place” for immigrant parents “to seek support for everyday needs” (Georgis et al., 2014, p. 25). As mentioned above, Birman et al. (2007) and Shiffman (2019) would advocate for the collaboration between ESOL and special education specialists in the school and community-based agencies so valid, culturally sensitive psychoeducational evaluations could occur, definitive diagnoses and recommended interventions identified, and differentiated instruction and other accommodations provided. The goal of this family-school-community collaboration through community schools would be to foster more effective and clear communication (Shiffman, 2019) and more comprehensive services tailored to immigrant students and their families that are mutually beneficial and enriching for all involved.

## Conclusion

The programming and discussions detailed in this essay could provide a foundation to honor and serve our students and parents who are EBLs. Many of the proposed activities could be done economically by leveraging existing community and volunteer resources and could also be adapted to online/virtual formats to address physical distancing and “lockdown” measures during viral pandemics. The explicit purpose of the multifaceted and diverse activities proposed is to address the fallacy that “one size fits all” in varied situations and contexts and to combat the “deficit thinking” surrounding immigrant parents who are EBLs. The programming’s flexible design and implementation are meant to give immigrant families multiple points of entry and engagement with school and community resources, including nonimmigrant parents, so they can transcend merely surviving and actually thrive. One manifestation

of thriving is when children and families realize their academic and vocational potentials or become more actively involved in civic endeavors. This potential is realized when immigrant students are encouraged to explore postsecondary options and placed into academic, postsecondary preparation courses versus being tracked as “non-college” (Luna & Martinez, 2012). If the proposed programs are clearly and effectively communicated in culturally and linguistically relevant and appropriate ways (Paris & Alim, 2017; Shiffman, 2019) and scheduled when immigrant parents can actually attend (Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015; Yol, 2019), their participation in the public schools and their children’s learning will likely increase. Through this enhanced participation, immigrant families and their children could acquire the skills and gain the self-efficacy and confidence needed to engage more fully in their communities and possibly evolve into community leaders and activists who tackle larger societal and policy issues. This enhanced self-efficacy and confidence could also enhance their access and achievement in postsecondary settings, especially higher education (Luna & Martinez, 2012). After all, giving voice and legitimacy to immigrant families and treating them fairly and equitably will likely have a synergistic effect that will enrich not only their own quality of life but also the overall functioning and status of their public schools, their communities, and American society as a whole.

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