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Abigail Amoako Kayser

California State University, Fullerton, aamoakokayser@fullerton.edu

Brian Kayser

University of Virginia, brk3m@virginia.edu

Lars Holmstrom

Albemarle County Public Schools, lholmstrom@k12albemarle.org

Barbara Leilani Brazil Keys

Albemarle County Public Schools, lkeys@k12albemarle.org

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“We Appreciate What You Are Doing, But You Are Doing It Wrong”: Two Schools Address School-Family Tensions Through Culturally Responsive Family Partnerships

Abigail Amoako Kayser, Brian Kayser,
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Abstract

As schools become more racially and ethnically diverse, the majority of teachers remain White, monolingual women from middle to upper-class backgrounds. This racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic mismatch can lead to difficulties in establishing strong family-school relationships where minoritized families often feel trivialized or ignored while minoritized students' academic and social outcomes are not met. This study interviews stakeholders at two public schools that acknowledged their family-school partnerships were not adequate and implemented steps, through schoolwide culturally responsive teaching (CRT) professional development, to improve them. One school, a dual-language immersion program with a growing Latinx population, recognized the value of including minoritized families' perspectives in school decisions and how to address “selective vulnerability” with White teachers' fear in building relationships with minoritized families. The second school, a majority-minority school, addressed family concerns over the treatment of minoritized students and fears stemming from the spread of white supremacy to implement family panels. From those panels, which increased tensions between teachers and families, the school took further steps to implement whole-

Abigail Amoako Kayser is an assistant professor in the Department of Elementary and Bilingual Education of the College of Education at California State University, Fullerton. Brian Kayser is a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. Lars Holmstrom and Barbara Leilani Brazil Keys are educational equity specialists with the Albemarle County Public Schools, Charlottesville, Virginia. Email addresses: aamoakokayser@fullerton.edu, brk3m@virginia.edu, lholmstrom@k12albemarle.org, & lkeys@k12albemarle.org

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staff CRT professional development to help teachers understand ideas like implicit bias while understanding the families of minoritized students' concerns and how to serve both the students and families better.

Keywords: culturally responsive family partnerships, family engagement, parent involvement, parent-school partnership, critical race theory

Introduction

School-aged children in the United States of America (U.S.) are increasingly becoming more diverse, and despite increasing racial and ethnic diversity across the U.S., the majority of teachers remain White, monolingual women from middle to upper-class backgrounds (Deruy, 2013; Noguera, 2017). The racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences between teachers and minoritized students can potentially interfere with students' academic and social outcomes and create a disconnect between teachers and their students' families (Banks, 2013; Caspe, Lopez, Chu, & Weiss, 2011; Delpit, 1992; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The urgent implication for school leaders is the potential cultural disconnect between school faculty and students and families, which can lead to negative academic outcomes and an overall lack of trust in the school.

Conversely, the engagement of families in schools leads to positive relationships between teachers and families. Though the limited involvement of families, including attendance at traditional parent-teacher events, has been shown to have an effect on student behavior referrals and detentions, it is family engagement, which includes multiple iterations of involvement, that is tied to positive academic outcomes for students (Baker, Wise, Kelly, & Skiba, 2016). When combined effects of teacher and parent efficacy were studied, higher grade point averages were shown amongst students who had both high teacher support and high parent engagement when compared to students who had effective teachers and "uninvolved" parents (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Parent engagement further enhances the relationship between school and families as educators listen to the families and draw upon their cultural "funds of knowledge" to promote academic achievement (Moll et al., 2005; Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, Ochoa, 2011).

Still, challenges exist in families' participation in schools. Communicating with minoritized students' families remains a challenge for many teachers, and historically, family engagement has been limited to parent-teacher conferences and parent-teacher associations (Goodwin & King, 2002). Because of power inequities inherent to traditional approaches, tensions between parents and teachers are more likely to occur, and distrust is likely to develop between minoritized families and school systems (Freire, 1994).

An additional barrier to families is the attitudes and mindsets educators carry about family involvement. Teachers often have contrasting perceptions of whether families want to be involved in the education of their children. While parents

overwhelmingly express the desire to be involved in school, teachers often believe that the majority of parents are uninterested (Baker et al., 2016; Goodwin & King, 2002). Often, schools have concerns about the degree to which parents are involved in their children's education.

Other barriers to family engagement are a lack of invitation from teachers, parent displeasure with the school environment, scheduling conflicts for school events, and, specifically for families of color, the implicit bias of teachers and administrators as well as the parent perception that racism is ubiquitous in the school system, and therefore not to be trusted (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Furthermore, a formidable body of research shows that African American families experience greater obstacles to involvement than White parents.

Teachers can ameliorate this problem if they take a culturally responsive lens to a family partnership (Goodwin & King, 2002; Toldson & Lemmons, 2013). Culturally responsive family partnership is the proactive involvement of families in the academic lives of the students in service of ameliorating persistent achievement gaps that exist for minoritized students.

Toldson and Lemmons (2013) suggested that culturally responsive family engagement outreach practices are an effective method of engaging parent participation. Through this approach, teachers can develop deep knowledge of students' backgrounds, address their own implicit and explicit biases that lead to deficit thinking, address their misconception about families unwillingness to participate in their children's education, and change their traditional approaches (i.e., parent-teacher conferences and phone calls home) (Goodwin & King, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

We ground our research in the theories of critical race theory¹ (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) to address the oversight of families of color, critique Eurocentric and traditional models of family engagement and attend to issues of equity and social justice in how we approach family engagement and partnership with elementary schools that work with families from marginalized communities. More specifically Daftary (2018) assert that using critical race theory "empower voices and perspectives that have been marginalized and encourages a problem to be placed in social, political, and historical context which considering issues of power, privilege, racism, other forms of oppression" (p. 1). Furthermore, the voices of those silenced are highlighted and require social action taken to address the inequities and injustices.

We also add the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and explore the tenet of cultural competence as it relates to students cultural "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005) and the extent to which schools build on students' "funds of knowledge" and deem necessary to establish relationships between students and school communities. Morrison,

Robbins, and Rose (2008) posits that “in order to build on students’ “funds of knowledge” teachers must first learn about elements of students’ culture through their own research and by developing personal relationship with their students” and “build bridges between these funds of knowledge and the curriculum” (p. 438). Moreover, schools must aspire to develop relationships between the school and the communities from which students come. This includes home visits as well as opportunities for families to partner with schools. There remains a gap in the literature in understanding what culturally responsive partnership looks like and the challenges associated with the practice. In this study, we hope to explore these issues and answer these questions:

1. How do teachers, parents, and school leaders at two different schools who work with minoritized students and their families use culturally responsive family partnerships to address the tensions that exist between diverse students, their families, and communities and school actors?
2. What examples may or may not provide constructive resolutions to these tensions?

Review of the Literature

There are several themes that emerge from the literature on transforming family partnerships. Communication must be reconceptualized in a way that develops honest, two-way feedback develops trust, and shares power over decision making (Baker, Wise, Kelly, & Skiba, 2016; Cook, Shah, Brodsky & Morizio, 2017; Francis, Blue-Banning, Haines, Turnbull & Gross, 2016). Schools must consider the perceptions and experiences of families as they enter the physical space of the school, and take concrete, visible, and proactive steps to create a welcoming environment (Baker et al., 2016; Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009). The work of establishing effective family partnerships is undoubtedly within the domain of the teacher, but there are also critical roles that school leaders must play, both at the building and the division level (Auerbach, 2009; Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011; Lavorgna, 2016). Finally, school communities must create the space to hear frank feedback with families about the specific barriers to family partnerships, as well as the suggestions that families have for moving beyond those barriers (Murray Finigan-Carr, Jones, Copeland-Linder, Haynie, & Cheng, 2014; Muscott, Szczesiul, Berk, Staub, Hoover, Perry-Chisholm, 2008).

Re-imagining Communication

Traditionally, educators have often viewed the act of “communication” with families as synonymous with the dissemination of information about teaching and learning along with a mostly unidirectional path (Constantino, 2015). Parent communication is considered “successful” if contact can be made, and informa-

tion can be passed along from the school to the family. Though families report that successful communication in this narrow sense still leaves much to be desired (Baker et al., 2016), when viewed through the lens of establishing equitable partnerships with diverse families, this narrow conception of family communication also has inherent limits. Especially when educators and families do not share common experiences and beliefs. This one-way communication can maintain distances that limit trust, diminish the potential for feedback, and prevent meaningful conversations about student learning and growth.

As a starting point for change, educators should view family communication at least as much about listening as about reporting. This change in stance should occur in combination with the mindset that values families as the experts on their children (Francis, Blue-Banning, Haines, Turnbull & Gross, 2016). This is especially critical when the culture of the educators is different from the culture of the families and students served: families can fill in vital, and otherwise unknown, details about students' experience, as well as their own experiences, with school. Communicating with immigrant families requires a distinct skill set that should be actively cultivated (Francis, Haines, & Nagro, 2017). Establishing multiple modes of communication is important to communicate with families on their own terms, but the value of face-to-face communication should not be underestimated (Francis et al., 2016), particularly when it comes to re-establishing trust. One valuable method for hearing feedback and establishing two-way communication pathways in school communities is the creation of "community dialogues," especially when those community dialogues occur regularly and are incorporated into responsive action plans for better meeting the needs and desires of underserved communities (Cook et al., 2017).

Welcoming School Environments

The perception of some families that they are unwelcome and undervalued by the school community (Cook et al., 2017) can be immediately reinforced when they enter the school building. This is a critical barrier to effective family partnerships that can be tackled by leadership teams and administrators. According to Mapp, Johnson, Strickland, and Meza, (2008), well-executed "family centers" that welcome families and provide useful information in multiple languages can act as "zones of community," softening the boundary between the school and surrounding neighborhoods. Administrators can create opportunities for face-to-face contact by encouraging faculty to be present and available for casual conversation during key points in the school day, such as drop off and pick up (Halgunseth et al., 2009).

Many of the barriers that exist to school-family partnerships such as child-care, work hours, food, transportation, and language may seem to be outside the purview of educational communities. However, families that see school communities actively working to build systems that mitigate those barriers are more

likely to engender the trust and support of families (Francis et al., 2016). Lastly, schools that wish to operationalize the desire to have greater parent participation in student learning should begin by welcoming families to visit classrooms during instructional time. Research by Baker et al. (2016) reports that parents view sitting in on class as a way to be involved in student learning and as a way to build relationships with teachers and the school. Welcoming families to do so, and creating easy access is yet another way that is recognized as useful in creating welcoming school environments that support successful family partnerships.

Partnered Problem Solving

When schools open lines of communication and take steps to ensure that families feel welcome in the building, they can begin the process of seeking feedback on remaining barriers to healthy school-family partnerships. Indeed, collaborative problem solving with families is critical and executed most successfully when families not only participate in helping educators “see” the barriers but also participate in the process of identifying solutions to those barriers. This collaborative problem-solving effort is necessary in order to help educators see past potential blind spots caused by deficit notions of families; in absence of a collaborative effort, the solutions posed by educators alone are often inadequate to truly overcoming barriers (Baker et al., 2016). White, middle-class values and experiences largely shape dominant attitudes and practices around family engagement, and frequently do not resonate with underserved families (Henderson et al., 2006). As such, there is a moral imperative to seek the perspectives of communities of color, given the fact that barriers to successful family partnerships are more likely to be present, and present in specific ways, for families of color (Murray et al., 2014).

Transformational Leadership

Finally, leaders must play a role in establishing successful school-family partnerships. When families see that administrators are making a strong effort to partner with teachers to build family partnerships, they are more likely to engage (Epstein et al., 2011). Leadership as an act of social justice is a mindset common to administrators that successfully lead their school communities to deepen partnerships with families, but Auerbach (2009) specifies that leaders must also be viewed by families as taking significant, concrete actions to more successfully partner with families in order to be fully impactful. As is true in all areas of re-visioned family partnerships, the act of power-sharing and shared decision making is also common to successful school leaders—not just when it comes to making decisions about individual children’s education but also when it comes to making critical systemic and programmatic decisions (Halgunseth et al., 2009).

All of these leadership tenets are true not just for building-level leaders, but for division leaders as well. School divisions that transform partnerships with

families commonly have central leadership qualities and actions and play an active role in partnering with schools and communities to achieve these ends (Epstein et al., 2011). Lastly, school and division leaders that establish successful school-family partnerships engage in systematic reflection about their own beliefs and practices (Lavorigna, 2016).

Methods

This study occurred in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States at a large school district, at two public elementary schools within the same district. There are over 1,000 teachers and 14,000 students in the mostly suburban district, which serves grades PreK-12. At the time of the study, both schools had principals that had served in their respective school for over ten years.

School A, which serves PreK-5, is a suburban school and is one of the largest schools in the division. School A is a Spanish-English dual-language immersion school with over 600 students. The school demographics are 34% Latinx, 8% Two or More Races, 8% Black, 2% Asian, and 48% White. 44% of the students were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

School B, which also serves PreK-5, was a suburban elementary school with majority-minority students and no dual-language immersion program. There were over 500 students of which 30% were Black, 22% were Latinx, 8% were Asian, 8% were Two or More Races, and 32% were White. 60% of the students were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The researchers invited school leaders, teachers, staff, and parents who participated in home-school family partnership teams. The members of this team met regularly and implemented initiatives to strengthen home-school partnerships at their respective schools. At school A, the team members interviewed for this study included the principal, assistant principal, a team of four teachers who made the English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) team and two parents. At school B, the team included the principal, two teachers, and the school counselor and two parents. Semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews were scheduled. All interviews were face-to-face with all the participants and lasted between 30 to 45 minutes for each participant. The focus group interview was with the team of ESOL team of teachers at school A. The interview sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis using Marshall & Rossman, (2016) thematic analysis.

We began data analysis with open coding to look for key ideas in our data. All the interview data were read, line by line multiple times. We worked together to generate a set of emergent codes grounded in the literature of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). We coded the interview data with the emergent codes and also looked for themes and other relevant information that would help answer research questions one and two. In the next round of coding, we reread the data to look for patterns

across the data and began clustering similar data. Here, we pulled excerpts from the data. The findings focused on themes that appear more frequently across the data analysis process.

Findings

We begin the findings sections by discussing the issues in family-school partnerships that emerged when school leadership solicited families' input on the state of their family-school partnerships. We then provide results on how school teams moved towards culturally responsive family partnerships in an attempt to address these issues.

At school A, the dual-language immersion school, families reported that the school did not listen to their needs and only engaged them during cultural celebrations. In response to this, the school leaders created a family engagement team to move the school toward a whole-school culturally responsive professional development and culturally responsive family-partnership. At School B, the majority-minority school, the desire to evaluate and strengthen family partnerships that were encompassing of families from minoritized groups was driven by the remnants of white supremacy-sparked racialized tensions in the community that permeated interactions between school leaders, teachers, families, and students within an elementary school context.

At both schools, the administrators and teachers noted that a shift towards culturally responsive family-partnership was a gradual change. A more detailed account of our findings follows.

“They Don’t Listen To Us”:

Gaps in Communication Between Schools and Families

Before both schools made a concerted effort to build stronger partnerships with families, the schools' findings related to family involvement mirrored trends described in the literature. Also, before schools improved their outreach to families, communication followed typical trends of reaching out for conference nights and school events. One parent from the dual-language immersion school stated that “The general sense is that families were welcome for Latino events but not for academic purposes.” Other families echoed this sentiment. Another parent stated, “I only get calls when something is wrong. I only hear from them when something is wrong.” She continued, “Schools do not listen to parents. I’ve been involved in several different schools in several different states. I’ve seen the same thing.”

Teachers also believed these feelings to be true, as one teacher said, “It was me communicating what was going on to parents, where parents are generally aware of events, but there is not a genuine partnership between the family and the teacher.” Teachers also saw that the lack of regard for parent perspective is a division-level problem as well. “There are no families on decision-making bodies in

the division. We are told that there are, but they are not authentic decision-making partners,” the teacher stated.

When we explored why there were gaps in communication between teachers and families who did not speak English as their first language, contacting families was a perceived challenge as well as a general fear of not knowing how to communicate, much less collaborate. One teacher noted the challenge of contacting parents as more of an excuse when they said, “I don’t have a way to get in contact with them. That’s what we say, as teachers.” Another teacher expanded on this idea when they said, “I think a lot of teachers that I work with acknowledge that email is not the best way to meet somebody, so they’ll try to make the phone calls, but they’ll say, the number has changed or, the number doesn’t work, so I have no way to get in contact with them. Or they’ll write notes and send them home, but I’ve seen that as the extent of what teachers will do to rectify that.”

One teacher, while acknowledging and explaining gaps in communication, said, “I think it was just a lack of understanding. It was something the school had not seen in the past and then over a quick period of time, the population changed. People just didn’t know how.” To better connect with their families, teachers needed more support on how to establish and cultivate learning partnerships.

An administrator was more blunt in describing why communication between families and teachers was suffering. “I think we’re more comfortable with people who look like us. There are families that come in and they know how to play school. It seems like those are easier conversations and we seem more comfortable at events with who we talk to. If you’re the only person and you’re at an event, ‘Oh, I gotta meet all these people,’ who’s the first person you go to? The first person you know or that you already have a connection to.” Teachers echoed this, as one teacher stated, “There was a lack of comfort” with reaching out to Latinx families at the school. Another teacher took this idea further when they hypothesized why so many teachers have struggled to reach out to Latinx families:

There’s not going to be a comfort level if I have to meet a parent that’s a completely different culture and completely different language and completely different socioeconomic status that I’ve never dealt with before. So how am I going to? I don’t know how to approach that, so I just won’t, probably.

The implications of this mean that as teachers reach out to families, there will most likely always be a reason to contact a family that the teacher is comfortable with rather than families where they might harbor negative assumptions towards or have a general fear and lack of efficacy of connecting to because of language or cultural differences.

**“You’ve Been Getting It Wrong”:
Whole-School Culturally Responsive Professional Development**

Despite efforts, school administrators and teachers recognized that their re-

relationships and partnerships with their Latinx community had much room for improvement. For one administrator, this realization was made concrete when a mother of a student approached her about the school's Hispanic Heritage Night, which had previously been planned by the school with requests sent out to families asking for food or cultural contributions. The administrator describes her interaction with a mother of the group during the event planning:

Being that we've spent so much time in one community and building relationships has allowed a lot of these families to feel like they can come in and say, here's what this is really about and this is what you are doing the wrong kind of take over, I think that is a very powerful voice and I know that was a really special moment for me. I still remember the moms coming to see me. They said, "We appreciate what you're trying to do, but you've been getting it wrong, and we would like to take it over and be a part of the planning. I think that was a huge moment for me but also a huge moment to realize that there's a lot of things we've been doing to get to the point where they can say that, but we still don't have all of our families represented.

This acknowledgment of family voice and agency was an important catalyst for the dual-language school to consider other ways to meet their families' needs. However, as the communication surrounding the planning of Hispanic Heritage Night shows, it was important to shift the lens from family involvement to family partnerships. As teachers have stated, there was both a lack of knowledge and a fear that they would be unable to build meaningful partnerships with families from the Latinx community.

The administrator at the dual-language immersion school, instead of seeing her teachers as lacking the skills or desire to build partnerships with Latinx families, saw that training and support was needed and that after receiving training and support, teachers would be able to improve their partnerships. When noting the perceived challenge of working with families from different cultural backgrounds, the administrator stated, "I think culturally responsive teaching opens up doors for inviting families to be a part [of the school] in other kinds of ways."

Staff acknowledged that the culturally responsive training was effective in forging stronger partnerships with Latinx families. "I think CRT² is a big part of that within an ESOL team but within a larger staff too," they say. "Just being better listeners to our parents." An example of this is that along with explicit CRT training, the dual-language immersion school also conducted a parent panel, which falls under the umbrella of CRT, where parents were invited to discuss their experience with educators. Overall, the panel was a valuable learning experience for staff, but it was difficult to hear certain feedback, like when one parent of a minoritized student said, "I think you're letting my son get by, that was a really powerful conversation," an administrator said.

As the school took conscious steps to improve relationships with Latinx families, teachers began seeing how to foster and capitalize on these relationships for

their students' benefit. One teacher noted there were two revelations that came from the training:

One, giving them an avenue where they can provide feedback and two, just recognizing the cultural wealth and that they [students' families] are experts in this area. It's not like we need to come up with the perfect way to read somebody's family. The families have ideas and ways to help us engage with them and engage with their students better.

Another teacher had a similar realization that cultivating relationships were not only possible but beneficial in helping students reach their goals. "You can tell that their child's education is their top priority. I've heard parents say, 'We just want our kids to have a better life than what we had, and that's why we're here.' And they understand that education is that vehicle." This realization also combats the common narrative of minoritized families and school involvement, where teachers are quick to assign negative traits like apathy to minoritized families who may not participate in school through traditional means. Instead, teachers are building the counter-narrative through their actions and now seeing families in a different light. "Parents are stakeholders," one teacher stated. "They have a voice and a goal here." Instead of seeing families from the deficit perspective, teachers are also more cognizant of how families are the experts of their children. "Parents often help us understand their kids better because who knows their kid the best?" a teacher asked. "That's where I've seen the biggest impact with academics is how to understand the child and how to teach the child from their parenting expertise."

As more teachers created authentic partnerships with families as well as shifted their perspective for how they viewed the families, they shifted away from the participatory methods of engaging families. Instead, family engagement was redefined. One teacher stated, "And I think one of the things that was kind of novel was realizing that family engagement doesn't just mean inviting families to participate. It's a two-way communication that has to take place where families are not just coming to an event." Another teacher acknowledges that Latinx families are still invited for Hispanic Heritage Month and to facilitate after-school cooking and cultural clubs but that there is more meaning behind that. "I think the bigger purpose behind that is I want the presence of those families in this school to be a normal thing. I want them being a part of the school, to be a part of every day, every week, every month." Even within these events, as an administrator stated earlier, a power dynamic has shifted to where Latinx families are not simply asked to participate but asked to lead the planning of the events and clubs so that they will be culturally authentic and representative.

Using students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 2005) or the knowledge they bring to the classroom that may or may not directly relate to the curriculum is another method of being culturally responsive. Not only does understanding students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 2005) help teachers build stronger

relationships and connections to the curriculum, but it also helps teachers connect and build relationships with families. Teachers at the dual-language immersion program became skilled at recognizing students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 2005). An administrator described what happened during a sharing activity as teachers used the culture bank to draw on students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 2005):

When all the teachers and all the kids brought their pieces in if you're really good at listening to what the kids were doing, you automatically had a hook for something that you could talk to the family about it because they already opened the door. It just changes the opportunities to have conversations.

Another valuable learning opportunity was a math night the school hosted to show families how students were learning multiplication and division. During that event, families were also enabled to become masters of content. A teacher explained, "What ended up happening was there were lots of discussions of, "This is how I did it in Honduras" that ended up being more of a conversation of, "Let's learn from each other." These opportunities have helped teachers realize the value of such events and why these need to happen on a consistent basis.

Most importantly, the administration at the dual-language immersion school recognizes the importance of moving beyond events and continuing to work towards authentic family-school partnerships. One administrator explained their philosophy:

I can think of lots of things that are done to engage families, but they are just activities and events. I ask myself what is that accomplishing. If we're going to have Hispanic Heritage Night, I ask myself what are we getting out of that. Not just shift what you learn about a culture or a community by having something like that but also how that influences students learning beyond the event. Part of what we do in schools is we have a lot of events, but they don't really carry on beyond that event. Black History Month, it's a really good example. A lot of people don't know what to do for Black History Month, but it's really not about February. It's about September. It's about October. It's about November. It would be about looking at our own curriculum, we're thinking about how we're incorporating some of what we have learned about students' culture, how it helps us build partnerships with our families, how are we really shifting our pedagogies.

Looking Ahead:

A Gradual Change to Strengthening Family-School Partnerships

While the dual-language immersion school made improvements in their family-school partnerships, school administrators recognized that teachers were establishing relationships built upon communication and trust, especially with communities that did not previously experience strong communication and trust, that this takes time to grow and develop. "I don't think that we've mastered that at all,"

an administrator stated in regard to the school's culturally responsive practices. "I think we've done a lot of small things. The parent panel is definitely one of them. I don't think we've mastered yet what a partnership looks like."

The administration recognized that while the parent panel was a success, more discussion needs to happen to enact greater change. However, what has made this change possible, the administrator noted, is that "a lot more teachers have had opportunities to make connections this year than they did in previous years."

Teacher comfort in working with families outside of their own cultural background has also increased. The CRT training has helped teachers understand that it is okay to feel uncomfortable and vulnerable but not okay to forgo learning partnerships because of these feelings. Also, through School A's home visits, teachers were able to forge connections they hadn't been able to in the past. "I think for me, the biggest challenge is that I'm not fluent in Spanish," one teacher said. "I've been hesitant in the past to make connections because I'm nervous and I'm scared." However, participating in home visits helped me change these feelings.

After participating in home visits, the same teacher stated, "If a parent is willing to let you into their home, regardless of their living situation, that says a lot about how much they care and then for me to be willing to do that, it completely changes the dynamic with the parent because they can genuinely see how much I care." While a well-known barrier to family-school relationships is a language barrier, teachers at this dual-language immersion school have experienced a vulnerability similar to the families who do not speak English as their home language. One teacher, who taught in English and did not speak Spanish, stated that showing vulnerability helped forge relationships: "I'm sad my Spanish is not good. Breaking down that barrier, let them see that that I'm vulnerable too. We're on the same page. And being genuine goes a long way." One teacher referenced Hammond's (2014) CRT terminology, referring to this feeling as "selective vulnerability." This teacher noted that the CRT training helped them to be more "intentional to vulnerability," noting that there is vulnerability on both the family and the teacher side, and that being aware of these power dynamics, where teachers were typically in control and families had little voice and agency, is essential to establishing a strong partnership. The administrator stated her goal is teacher ownership of these relationships:

I know what it doesn't look like. It doesn't look like when we're getting ready to have a meeting with parents, and teachers want me to make the phone call for them. They need to feel comfortable making their own phone call.

Racialized Tensions Awaken the Need for Communication Between Schools and Families at School B

At the majority-minority school, racial and ethnic tensions stemming from white supremacist attacks on their city prompted both families and teachers to

question the safety of students and explore what steps could be taken to better serve students of color at the school. Additionally, the school was moving into multi-age classrooms from the traditional same-grade classes typically found in schools, and families of students of color did not feel their voices were heard because their feedback was never solicited and they were never notified of the initiative until the week before school started. “A lot of what was happening in school was being labeled as race-related based on the racial tensions that already existed in our society,” one teacher said. In response to these complaints, the principal, who worked with their district’s equity team, organized panels for families of students of color and all teachers in the school. Attendance was required for all teachers, and members of the equity team moderated the discussion.

During the panels, families, and teachers discussed a variety of topics, including communication and what happens in the classroom as it related to race and ethnicity. Families sat in an inner circle while the faculty sat in an outer circle. At any time, families and teachers could engage in dialogue and ask questions. “It was a large array of topics that families were concerned about that we had the chance to sit back and listen,” one teacher said. Another teacher felt the “conversations were raw,” noting that made teachers “feel so uncomfortable to talk about race, to confront this uncomfortability” and recalls one of the moderators saying:

I know this is weird for some people because growing up white, I never had conversations about race or ethnicity in my household, ever, unless something went wrong. And yet I realized that by having friends who are people of color, that they talk about it all the time, in their families, with their children, all the time. It’s a part of their lens. So, it’s going to be uncomfortable for us to talk about it.

During these panels, families shared that they did not feel as though teachers were holding their children accountable academically and that behavioral expectations and classroom expectations, overall, lacked structure. Teachers we interviewed noted that there were tensions between teachers and families. Teachers felt like they were doing everything they could to help their students succeed and it was difficult for them to hear differently and students’ families felt like their children were underserved when compared to students from White and middle to upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds at the same school.

While tensions were not immediately resolved, the principal took steps to build more positive family-school relationships. First, the principal invited families to assist in the planning of professional development on CRT that would be implemented with the entire teaching staff the following year. Three CRT modules were designed, and all teachers participated. A monthly book study, using Zaretta Hammond’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, was used. Teachers met monthly to discuss the book. The administration also agreed to tie CRT into teacher evaluations, as it was added to each teacher’s performance appraisal.

Over time, as teachers engaged in and gained a stronger understanding of cul-

turally responsive practices and tensions between families and teachers lessened and teachers have invited families into their classroom to participate in different ways. One teacher noted that families were used for their “expertise or values.” This teacher also noted, “I have seen there is value in sharing our common experiences.”

This school still has more work to do, but, as one teacher said, “teachers are more open to seeing that there might be another perspective. There’s a lot of work that needs to happen with implicit bias within our staff and implicit assumptions, microaggressions, and assumptions about cultures. We are in that process right now.” However, that teacher has also noticed progress: “As for commitment by the staff, they are slowly, slowly, with the leadership of the school, changing the way in which they engage families.” Another teacher seconded that statement noting that “It’s still a work in progress. I think we are still at this point where we are still deciding, as a school, how to address our issues and concerns and it’s still very much that we, as a school, are going to figure out how to do this.” Teachers and administrators both recognized that forging authentic relationships with families was a gradual process and that while, as a school, they felt they had made significant gains, there was still much work to do. To foster progress, administrators made strategic hires for the 2018-19 school year, as they sought teachers who were, as one teacher noted, “committed to that learning process and shift for working with diverse families.” Administrators recruited and hired teachers, both within and outside of the district, who were adept at cultivating a different type of family partnership. Administrators from School B were also committed to a new focus on hiring and retaining African American teachers since, compared to the other schools in the division, they had a relatively higher percentage of African American students.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand how two schools used in culturally responsive family partnerships to strengthen their engagement of minoritized families in their schools. According to the results of the study, the schools chose to engage in culturally responsive family partnerships in response to feedback that originated from parent panels that were held to ameliorate tensions between the schools and the families. The findings also showed while teachers were eager to engage in practices identified as culturally responsive, teachers and school leaders admitted that this commitment required continuing efforts, participation, and sometimes vulnerability from teachers, school leaders, and families.

This study provides results that are consistent with previous research. First, in the traditional sense of family involvement, the narrative from the findings indicate that the voices and expertise of families from the marginalized community were not validated. Consistent with the work of Constantino (2015), communication with families were unidirectional, and the teacher’s position was the knowledge giver and grantor of information to families. In this position, they de-

cided when and what kind of was shared with families. Similarly, traditional ways of connecting and communicating with families were limited to phone call and emails (Baker et al., 2016) and teachers expressed frustration when they could not connect with families from marginalized communities. Through the lens of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), these Eurocentric approaches that support the needs of White middle-class expectations run counter to experiences of families from marginalized communities.

Our second finding was also consistent with previous research on family partnerships. In both school contexts, when teachers, school leaders, and families moved toward culturally responsive family partnerships, the idea of family involvement shifted, families had a seat at the social and academic table of the school and were viewed as vital members of the school community and families from marginalized communities took a more active role in what happened in the classroom as well as special events that brought the school community together. In this regard, these families were given amplifiers to strengthen their voices and shift the power dynamics that governed what happened in the school (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Historically, families from marginalized communities felt unwelcome and undervalued by the school (Cook et al., 2007), and the participants in the study echoed these experiences. At both schools, when the school leaders and teachers took the initiative (Auerbach, 2009; Galindo & Sheldon, 2011) to build family partnerships and begin the process of hosting parent panels or “family zones of community” (Mapp et al., 2008), they heard first-hand accounts of what the schools were doing wrong. Those events became a catalyst for change.

It is worth noting that the parent panels were not enough; it was a starting point. The leadership team encouraged the whole school to take a more culturally responsive lens and provided opportunities for professional development and coaching from the equity specialist supported this development. Furthermore, it required teachers and administrators to surrender some of their beliefs and assumptions about families from a marginalized community and accept the fact that these families had “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 2005) that were worthy of informing teaching and learning.

Implications and Conclusions

This study contributes to the practices of culturally relevant pedagogy by providing examples of how two schools began to shift from traditional family involvement to culturally responsive family partnerships and the successes and difficulties associated with the process. Through the findings, we note several strategies that supported the implementation of culturally responsive partnership. First, the role of a school leader who acknowledges that traditional approaches do not work for all families and is invested in culturally responsive practices is key to this reform.

Secondly, school leaders must provide opportunities-professional development, coaching, support, and resources to encourage teachers to partake in this work.

We also purport that families from marginalized communities must be seen as partners and stakeholders for true partnerships to happen. In a similar vein, families must be given opportunities to voice their opinions, enact their opinions, and see positive changes. Similarly, parental partnership must not be limited to school events. Rather, they must be seen as an individual who has knowledge that vital to the academic development of all children. When families become decision-makers on the school level, it decreases the marginalizes of the families and helps teachers learn to teach in a way that is beneficial to all learners.

Notes

¹ Note that in this article, CRT is used to reference Culturally Relevant Teaching/ Training, while critical race theory is written out to refer to the theory.

² In our trainings and workshops, educators used CRT to describe Culturally Relevant Teaching.

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