Assessing the Needs of Immigrant, Latino Families and Teachers in Rural Settings:

Building Home-School Partnerships

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Author Note

This article is dedicated to the memory of Thomas J. Coady (co-author), whose life and work touched the lives of countless immigrant families and children. August 2, 1992-December 6, 2014
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Abstract

Newly-arrived non-English speaking immigrant families living and working in rural US settings face multiple challenges, including social isolation, transportation, and access to everyday services. These challenges, coupled with language and cultural differences, impede immigrants’ ability to access educational programs that support their children’s learning. Situated in a rural Florida setting, this project sought to understand teachers’ and families’ beliefs and needs, using survey and interview data. We then describe how we developed non-traditional outreach programs and materials, such as the fotonovela, to facilitate home-school partnerships with immigrant Latino families and teachers. We discuss implications for educators.

Keywords: immigrant families, Latinos, rural, school partnerships, fotonovelas, non-traditional
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Assessing the Needs of Immigrant, Latino Families and Teachers in Rural Settings:

Building Home-School Partnerships

In this paper, we describe a school-home partnership project in a rural area of north Florida. While Florida is a state known as a destination point for immigrant Latinos, principally in large metropolitan areas of Miami, Tampa, and Orlando, immigrant families continue to settle in rural communities of the state. However, rural settings such as in north Florida are exceptional in that there are few, if any, social services available to support the social integration of families into communities. Moreover, there is limited access to public transportation, health clinics, and English learning programs that further foster their integration and access to information and resources. In this paper we describe how one project identified and responded to the local needs of immigrant Latino families in a rural school district. We used nontraditional outreach methods to connect Latino immigrant families to schools. Our findings show that “partnership-building” with immigrant families in rural settings entails building relationships with multiple stakeholders (teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, parents, children); discovering strengths of immigrants in the community; and affirming and building upon those strengths. In this paper we describe that process and underscore non-traditional and locally-developed materials that meet the needs of families living in those settings.

The Link between Home and School

Recent research in education underscores the important and critical role that the home environment plays in student learning in school. Parental (used interchangeably here with caregiver) involvement defined under the No Child Left Behind Act is ‘the
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participation of parents [sic] in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (NCPIE, 2004). Caregiver involvement in a child’s education is considered to be a key element to support student learning in school. Yet is parental involvement the same for both mainstream families and non-mainstream families? If not, how does it differ? This study presents findings from a study that investigated the process of building home-school partnerships with immigrant Latino families. This qualitative study sought to understand both teachers’ and immigrant Latino families’ perceptions of the home-school connection and to identify ways to enhance that effort. The specific research questions were:

- What are teachers’ understandings of and perceived needs related to immigrant Latino families in one rural community?
- What are immigrant Latino families’ understandings and needs related to schools in one rural community?
- How can partnerships be built between immigrant, Latino families and schools to support student learning in that community?

Scholars of home-school partnerships posit that parental support at home for student learning has a positive, significant effect on students’ overall educational outcomes, including parents of ELLs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon, 2003). Sheldon (2003), for example, notes that parental involvement is best facilitated when schools (namely educators and teachers) form partnerships with parents and work in collaboration with parents to support the learning and developmental needs of the children. In studies of home-school partnerships, researchers found that partnerships between the school and home reduce student absentee-ism, reduce the drop-out rate and incidents of bullying, and
have a strong positive relationship to student learning outcomes (Molnar, 2013; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; 2005).

Other scholars note that not all partnership-building efforts can or should look the same (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). For educators of children from non-mainstream families, such as immigrant and ELL, effective parental involvement may not follow “traditional” views or practices typically associated with parental involvement, such as a parent aiding in the classroom, grading or filing student papers, and supporting education staff in the school building. In contrast to those parent efforts, Jeynes’ meta-analysis of 77 studies (2003) identified two key areas of parental involvement that appeared to positively influence student learning outcomes: (1) parental communication (essentially, conversations) in the home with children; and (2) parents’ expressed high expectations of their children. In his review, Jeynes (2003) noted that these findings held true for both the overall population and for Latino families in particular. So, while traditional parental involvement may meet mainstream parents’ and children’s needs, the two efforts noted above have a more significant effect on student learning, and those efforts may be more accessible to immigrant Latino families.

In addition, scholars studying immigrant family-school partnerships have found that parental involvement differs by population needs and should be tailored to meet the needs of the local community (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). These findings come as good news to educators who feel the pressure to build parental involvement in the classroom with a population that is not able to be present for cultural, linguistic, or other (economic) reasons.
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Another challenge that schools face when partnering with immigrant families is differences in the concept of parental “involvement” or parental “participation.” Immigrant parents may not share similar notions of or experiences with school participation and often do not view their presence in the classroom as contributing to student learning (Spring, 2008). Moreover, immigrant parents typically feel uncomfortable in the school environment, where the teacher is considered the expert and authority (Coady, 2001; Spring, 2008). This fact is compounded when parents are second language English learners themselves (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Another challenge to creating partnerships with immigrant families is the time commitment for working class parents who maintain full time (and often several) jobs and are not available during the daytime hours while school is open. Finally, there are additional, unique challenges that rural communities face when building partnerships with immigrant families. Those challenges include having limited access to transportation and childcare for younger siblings.

In this paper, we report our initial steps in the process of understanding and building relationships with Latino immigrant families in one rural setting in Florida. This work constituted part of a larger project funded by the Ford Foundation, which sought to build partnerships between newcomer immigrant, Latino families and Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) to foster the social integration of immigrant Latinos into communities (Coady, 2013). It also aimed to understand the nature of social integration for immigrant Latinos by investigating the barriers and opportunities available in rural settings. The education component (this work) constituted one focus of the larger Ford Foundation-funded project; other foci consisted of health education and immigration.
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The initial steps toward building home-school partnerships with immigrant Latino families were undertaken in two ways: 1) gauging teachers’ knowledge of and experiences working with immigrant Latino families in their community; (2) understanding the educational experiences and needs of those families; and (3) using families’ strengths, including their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, to inform, create and disseminate materials to support children’s education at home and at school.

To meet those objectives, we began by interviewing immigrant Latino families about their needs and experiences within the identified, local school district. We also investigated what educators in the local school district believed about the families and what they wanted to know more about in order to achieve the goal of partnership-building. To reiterate, the research questions that guided this work included:

- What are teachers’ understandings of and perceived needs related to immigrant, Latino families in one rural community?
- What are immigrant, Latino families’ understandings and needs related to schools in one rural community?
- How can partnerships be built between immigrant, Latino families and schools to support student learning in that community?

In the following section, we describe the theoretical framework of the study.

A “Strengths-based” Approach to Building Partnerships

To conceptualize this work, we draw upon a “strengths-based” orientation to building partnerships with immigrant Latino families. We view the contributions that those families make as a rich resource for and critical to the functioning of the overall community (Kisthardt, 2012; Saleebey, 2012). A strengths-based orientation involves a
person-centered approach as a method of working with individual. The approach entails discovering, affirming, and enhancing an individual’s strengths (Kisthardt, 2012) and includes affirming the capabilities and natural abilities of the individual (Saleebey, 2012). Applied to an education context with immigrant Latino families, we view the “strengths” of the families as their diverse cultural backgrounds, their linguistic abilities, their social network and survival skills (Moll et al., 1992), and their contributions to the economy of the community, to name a few. In this regard, the languages and cultures of the families are a resource upon which educators draw for student learning, inspiration, and creativity. Under this orientation, teachers view families’ non-mainstream experiences and backgrounds as resources for teaching and learning, rather than deficits that should be ignored or eradicated (Ruiz, 1984).

Moll et al. (1992) have described how Latino families’ knowledge can be used in educational settings. Using a framework of “funds of knowledge,” they identified how the survival skills, cross-national travel and international experiences, and networking skills of Latino, immigrant families contribute to community wells or “funds” of expertise. “Funds of knowledge” also include the rich cultural and linguistic resources of the families, such as home literacy practices, oral storytelling, religious and familial practices, and international travel and communication (Coady, 2009). Moll et al. (1992) demonstrated how teachers connected with families by learning how they function and survive; teachers subsequently utilized that information as the backdrop for student learning and invited parents to share their knowledge and skills in the classroom. Using a funds of knowledge framework, individual family and student resources can be used in
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the classroom when teachers tap into those skills and knowledge by connecting new information and learning to the students’ background (Moll et al., 1992; Ruiz, 1984).

Families’ “funds of knowledge” can only come into focus when trust and positive relationships are forged between teachers, students, educators, and families. One way that teachers build trust is by affirming students’ identities, and they do this through a curriculum that reflects students’ diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Cummins (2000) theorizes that identity affirmation involves valuing and building upon students’ linguistic and cultural knowledge both for purposes of student learning and for earning students’ approval (Coady et al., 2008; Cummins, 2000). In other words, the task of teachers to affirm students’ identities in school is foundational to forming relationships with them. The relationships open the door to mutual learning, communicating, and sharing.

In sum, our conceptual framework consists of a strengths-based approach to building partnerships with immigrant Latino families. In an educational context, teachers discover students’ and families’ home languages and cultures; affirm students’ identities through the curricular and instructional decisions that they make; and enhance families’ strengths by using their knowledge and experiences as resources.

The Community Context

The local community in which we worked is best characterized as rural and agricultural in nature, with immigrants entering and leaving the community based on seasonal crop labor demands. In the community, immigrant Latinos are employed at plant nurseries, on horse (training) farms, and on dairy farms. They also engage in seasonal labor by harvesting peanuts and watermelon, and baling hay. While a handful of
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Latino families have been in the community for more than a decade and participate in church, school, and social events (fall harvest fairs), many are newer arrivals principally from Mexico and Guatemala, making this particular setting what has been described as a “new Latino destination” (Pew, 2013). Census (2010) data indicate that 87% of the county population is White, and about 8% is Latino. About 7% of the population speaks a language other than English in the home, and the average family income approximates $19,000/year.

The knowledge, skills, and experiences that Latino immigrant families bring to the community are varied and local. These include knowledge about seasonal harvest, animal care, crop labor, and dairy farming; they also include the skills necessary to survive in this rural setting, such as navigating and accessing basic health care under the duress of limited public transportation (Moll et al., 1992). Other knowledge includes familial networking skills, Spanish and indigenous languages, language-transfer skills (Cummins, 1981), and oral and written literacies (Coady, 2009).

Our partnership project was built on a consistent and long-standing relationship between the authors, the regional Office of Migrant Education, the school district, and several of the immigrant Latino families who had resided in the area for between five and ten years. A one-year pilot study of this work was initiated using seed monies from the grant-funding agency. The pilot work consisted of a 10-week adult ESL program for immigrant, Latino families held at a local church and that included school district staff (bilingual paraprofessionals). A professional adult ESL instructor was hired, and thematic units for the adult ESL classes were created based on a language-needs assessment conducted with families. During the first week of the pilot period, we interviewed
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families to determine their language-learning needs to create thematic units, and in subsequent weeks, we investigated their experiences in schools and in the community. Despite the fact that the families specifically requested ESL classes as a fundamental means to social integration into the community, that portion of the outreach program was not funded by the granting agency. The agency did fund outreach efforts that supported Latino immigrants into the community, such as nutrition and basic health care support; however, those efforts had to be conducted bilingually or in Spanish.

School district data underscore the rural nature of the community and families’ English language learning needs. As of 2012, the district consisted of approximately 5,600 students with about 200 identified English learners (ELs). The majority of ELs were in grades K-2 (about 53%). The ESOL ‘program’ consisted of mainstream teachers with an ESOL credential (endorsement), who modified instruction for ELs’ learning in regular, inclusive classrooms. A computerized language-learning software program (Rosetta Stone) supplemented teachers’ instruction, and there were four bilingual Spanish-English paraprofessionals in the district. The same computers were made available one night per week to immigrant, ELL parents with the immediate goal of providing English as a Second Language support to them. This was a direct response to the immigrant community’s desire to learn English in order to participate into the community and to integrate socially. Thus, although there was no direct funding for adult ESL in the rural area and this was a high priority for the community, there was no mechanism to provide direct services other than making the computers available to parents.
There was also a need for teachers with advanced ESOL professional development to boost English language development for the K-12 students. EL students’ academic achievement in the district concerned the teachers, principals, and administrators. EL student learning outcomes in the district in 2011-12 revealed the following: ELs met Florida’s Annual Measurable Achievement Outcomes (AMAOs) Objective #1 in percentage of students making gains in listening/speaking, reading, and writing in 2010-11 and 2011-2012. However, the district did not meet Florida’s AMAO #2 in percentage of students proficient in English (meeting benchmark) in 2010-11 in grades 3-5 or in grades 9-12 in 2011-12. As a result of these EL student achievement data and ELs’ low performance in reading and writing on the state standardized assessment, Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), the district ESL coordinator prioritized professional development efforts in the district for teachers and paraprofessionals working with English learners. She also prioritized the need to build partnership with immigrant, Latino families in order to support communication and home learning.

Research Design and Methods

To answer the research questions with the goal of taking first-steps to understand and build partnerships between immigrant Latino families and schools, we used two data collection methods: semi-structured oral interviews with Latino families (mothers), and online surveys with teachers in the community (Appendix A). The goal of this first phase of data collection was to determine what immigrant Latino families knew, wanted to know, and experienced with respect to schools (toward partnership-building) and what
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teachers in the district knew, wanted to know, and experienced with immigrant, Latino families.

Parents

In order to identify the families, many of whom were geographically and socially isolated in the community, we contacted the local Office of Migrant Education, a supplemental educational services program funded by the US Department of Education (Title I, part C). The migrant education personnel assisted us in identifying families who met the sampling criteria. The participants had to have had at least one school-aged child enrolled in the district, had moved to the community within the prior 5 years, and spoke Spanish as a primary language in the home. Due to the nature of using migrant education data as a source to identify participants, all of the participants were also receiving federal supplemental support because they worked in agriculture and were considered migratory (moving more frequently than every 36 months).

Initially we contacted two families with four children to participate in the first phase of data collection. Both families were geographically isolated; one lived and worked on a dairy farm and had just relocated from California, and the second was a single Latina mother living with her two elementary-grade sons at a women’s shelter. We conducted two semi-formal interviews with each family but made three to seven visits to each home. Each interview and visit lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audiorecorded. There was a bilingual (English-Spanish) primary researcher who conducted each interview, and a second researcher who took fieldnotes and ensured that the audiorecording device worked properly. In the second stage of conducting semi-structured interviews with immigrant families, we identified three additional Latina
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mothers who participated in the church-based adult ESL classes. The church-based adult ESL classes took place one night each week for eight weeks in the fall. We were given permission to hold the classes at the local Catholic church by the priest. During classes with parents, children were provided tutoring and homework support in a different area of the church.

The oral, face-to-face, semi-structured interview format served to build rapport with the women about their personal educational experiences and to understand their views and experiences of education in the local community. The second phase of interviews lasted about 60 minutes each and were audiorecorded and transcribed.

Data analysis consisted of organizing the transcriptions, translating, reading, and re-reading all of the data available. We coded the data based on participants’ experiences with and in education, their experiences and perceptions of their child’s school, and what they perceived to be important to (their) children’s success. We identified themes based on our coding, first with individual participant’s data. Next, we analyzed the data as a corpus to identify across the participants. For example, we identified participants’ desire and need for oral communication (via telephone or in person) with educators. Oral communication pointed to culturally-responsive forms of communication that further spoke to cross-cultural understanding between groups. We built upon the cross-analysis and patterns and identified larger motifs that addressed the research questions.

Teachers

To understand teachers’ experiences with immigrant Latino families, we created a survey instrument that consisted of 16 forced-choice questions and one open-ended question (see Appendix B). The survey was administered online to all teachers in the district in the
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Fall of 2012 via a link sent by the district ESOL Coordinator. The survey was completely anonymous. Within two weeks, 98 surveys were completed, and the full completion (all questions answered) rate was 69%. Data from the survey were compiled and simple statistical analyses were conducted.

The survey was administered online via a live link that was sent to all teachers in rural district by the district ESOL Coordinator. This was the only district surveyed. The Coordinator used district email addresses, and none of the emails or teachers’ identities were reported back to us. Page one of the survey was a university Institution Review Board (IRB)-approved letter stating the anonymity of the survey. The teachers were encouraged by the Coordinator to respond within one week, and after one week, 80% of the teachers had responded. A reminder email was sent after one week. By week 2, 98% of the teachers had completed the survey. Preliminary demographic findings from the survey indicate that 68% of teachers interacted with immigrant Latino families in the school setting, and about 19% interacted with immigrant Latino families in community settings.

Findings

We present our findings based on the initial research questions, and we draw conclusions from a synthesis of the data findings. Our first research question sought to unveil teachers’ understandings of and perceived needs related to immigrant Latino families in one rural community.

Our findings revealed some insight into the experiences of both teachers and of families related to the community. Thirty-seven of 85 responding teachers completing the survey taught at the elementary level, and 48 of 85 taught at the middle or high school.
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levels. Approximately 55% of the respondents (47/85) had completed the state-mandated professional development in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) under the 1990 Florida Consent Decree (FDOE, 2014). An additional 45% either had not completed the required professional development or were not sure. The findings were because they revealed that almost half of all of the district’s teachers still needed to complete some professional development related to English learners, and it opened the door for professional development opportunities regarding immigrant Latino families and children (Table 1).

Table 1

*Teacher Survey Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level Teaching</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of total survey respondents (85)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you completed the FL ESOL Endorsement requirement?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked about the areas that they wanted to know more about with respect to working with immigrant, Latino students, teachers noted the four main areas, in the order of importance:

1. Implementing effective instructional strategies for ELs
2. Assessment accommodations for ELs
3. Communicating with ELs' families
4. Building family-school-community partnerships

In addition, teachers were more evenly distributed across two other areas: the role of religious institutions to support immigrant families and issues of immigration. Additional survey findings indicated that teachers wanted to use professional development days to learn how to create a welcoming classroom environment for ELLs, and they also indicated a strong need to acquire strategies to communicate with the families of their English language learners (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Interest in The Following PD Opportunities (0= No desire; 5=Strong desire) (percentage of respondents. Total respondents =82)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Ave. Response (n/82)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating an inclusive, welcoming classroom environment for ELLs</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant families in the local community</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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| Role of religious organizations and outreach programs to support immigrant families | 23.2 | 11.0 | 14.6 | 20.7 | 12.2 | 18.3 | 2.4 |
| Issues of immigration and immigration law | 23.2 | 9.8 | 17.1 | 22.0 | 7.3 | 20.7 | 2.4 |
| Building home-school-community partnerships | 14.5 | 10.8 | 9.6 | 16.9 | 15.7 | 32.5 | 3.1 |
| Communicating with ELLs’ families | 14.6 | 4.9 | 6.1 | 20.7 | 20.7 | 32.9 | 3.3 |
| Implementing effective instructional strategies for ELLs | 10.8 | 6.0 | 8.4 | 19.3 | 14.5 | 41.0 | 3.4 |
| Assessment accommodation for ELLs | 14.6 | 4.9 | 9.8 | 19.5 | 12.2 | 39.0 | 3.3 |

It was clear from our survey that teachers felt the need for very focused information, materials, and strategies related to the cultural backgrounds of their students and families living in the community. Despite the fact that most had professional development in second language teaching and learning (meeting state requirements), teachers continued to express a need to understand children from a teaching (strategies) and learning outcomes (assessment) perspective.

Our second question attempted to understand immigrant Latino families’ perceptions and needs in the community. Again, our data were collected from semi-structured interviews with Latina mothers; findings highlighted ways that further
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informed our partnership-building efforts between homes and schools. For example, none of the families indicated having access to the school district’s bilingual aides on a regular basis. Parents were afraid to call the school on the phone because they could not communicate in English; phone-calls did not allow space for parents to navigate the language using non-verbal cues and responses. In addition, parents indicated that they did not receive information or materials, academic or otherwise, either written or oral in Spanish. Two parents indicated that their preference for communication was phone calls from the school, and this need underscored desire to connect personally with a key person or staff member at the school with whom they could develop an ongoing, trusting relationship.

The same parents cited limitations to transportation, having young children at the home during the school day, and limited English and literacy skills in Spanish as reasons for few school-home interactions. One Latina mother, who moved from California where systematic, weekly notes had been sent home to parents in Spanish, attempted to attend a parent-teacher conference, which her daughter helped her to arrange by translating and explaining the school invitation. Bad weather prevented the mother from leaving the home and attending the meeting. There was no follow up communication by school staff, and the mother was unable to initiate a conversation in Spanish with anyone at the school to re-schedule the meeting. Neither of the mothers had had a parent-teacher meeting for any of the four school-aged children during that entire academic year. In their experiences, the schools functioned as its own autonomous network, and there appeared to be no established communication network between the schools, homes, and/or community agencies (such as churches or health clinics).
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Interview data from the second set of Latina mothers at the ESL program confirmed those findings and added an additional layer of information. Those mothers indicated that education was the most important area to learn about, in order to support their children’s learning. When asked about her son’s elementary schooling, one mother named Rebeca responded, “no sé nada” (I don’t know anything), in a defeated tone. This was especially difficult for her because she was the most educated among our immigrant Latino parent participants and was an early childhood educator in Mexico. She mentioned that, “aunque [hay] computadora en casa, no sé usarla porque está todo en inglés” (although there is a computer in the house, I don’t know how to use it because everything is in English); accessing information about school online was not possible.

The parents also indicated a strong desire to participate in adult ESL classes and viewed English language acquisition as fundamental to school participation and social integration. Like the first two mothers, this second group collectively identified a need to learn about what the school required from them and to have information sent home in Spanish, with follow-up phone calls to ensure that they understood. Diana, for example, from San Luis Potosí, Mexico, described how she obtained information, particularly folletos (booklets), and found someone to translate by “busca[ndo] a una amiga en [la puebla] bilingue” (looking for a bilingual friend in town). Her need to obtain school information illuminated the families’ desires to support their children’s education and home learning.

Data from these first two research questions demonstrate a gap between teachers and families in terms of their understandings of each other. Again, we considered this information a crucial initial step in determining how teachers and parents could begin to
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build relationships and partnerships to support children’s learning. The data identified a gap between teachers’ need to learn about how to teach the children (primarily) and communicate with parents (secondary), and parents’ need for stronger communication mechanisms (primarily) and information from the schools in Spanish (secondary).

**Fostering Partnerships through Relationships and Resources**

Our third research question targeted specific processes and steps that could be taken to build partnerships between immigrant Latino families in this rural community and schools. Both teachers and parents in this study underscored the need for stronger communication channels, principally in order to convey information on their children’s learning and what practices could support learning in the home. This rural district had very limited language and funding resources for translation of classroom documents, such as weekly newsletters, or district policies (grading, attendance, and so on). Although some translated information appeared on the district website, families in this study had virtually no access to the Internet and none of them indicated that they knew how to access the district website. Our findings indicated that the first step of building partnerships required strong, clear, and consistent linguistically and culturally appropriate communication practices that reflected the families’ different access points (e.g. phone communication, translated, printed documents, online communication).

The schools and teachers responded to families’ call for language and literacy outreach and support. In collaboration with the ESL district program, the principal of one elementary school made a computer lab available to families one night each week. The computers had access to the Rosetta Stone software, which the parents accessed on a regular basis. The district provided additional funding to secure a bus to provide
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transportation to and from the school; the bus was available, however, only until state
testing in the spring. The district hoped that the parent and student homework support
would transfer into higher ESOL/immigrant student learning outcomes on state
standardized tests. During those meetings, bilingual paraprofessionals were paid a small
stipend to assist the children with homework while the parents used the computers.

In addition to those weekly events, the school district allowed us, as part of the
university community, to provide translation and interpretation support to parents in the
elementary schools. We focused this work principally at the elementary schools, because
the majority of the students were in those schools. We selected key events to attend and
created a visual presence in the schools for families and teachers, namely during the
back-to-school event in the late summer, parent-teacher conference nights, parent
information sessions, and state-mandated ESOL-Parent Leadership Committee (PLC)
meetings. We also attended and presented at teacher professional development days,
where we provided professional development to teachers regarding building partnerships
with immigrant, Latino families; the cultural and linguistic resources and strengths that
the families bring to schools; and how teachers can build ESOL classroom strategies.

Over the course of 24 months, we also created and disseminated culturally and
linguistically responsive materials that provided the immigrant Latino community with
information about the local education system. These were the same materials we used at
teacher professional development days with teachers. That purposeful decision was
intended to ensure that both parents and teachers had access to the same information.
While the immediate goal was to ensure that families had tools to support education at
home, a secondary goal was to establish a local network of knowledgeable families who
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could pass on the information on to others in the community. The materials included three fotonovelas, or graphic novels, that depicted local educational problems and provided solutions for immigrant, Latino families. The novelas were created in Spanish, but we offered palabras importantes, or important, keywords, in the back. Knowing that families may not read the materials if left alone, we disseminated these in person and “talked-through” the information with parents. We did this at computer literacy nights (described above), parent-teacher conference nights, and an annual multicultural evening held in June each year. The fotonovelas had several important features. The fotonovelas

• reflected local concerns and issues (that derived from our interviews);
• depicted local customs and language (Mexican, Guatemalan); and
• reflected local community needs with proposed solutions.

Fotonovelas are a traditional print medium found in Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean. They are also known as novelas and are similar in format to a comic book or graphic novel. Rather than using illustrations, sequential photographs were used and accompanied by dialogue bubbles placed over photographs (see Figure 1). In our work the fotonovelas depicted simple, dramatic stories or problems related to education. They showed relationships between two (or more) characters. The more experienced or knowledgeable character in the story provided a solution to the educational problem described.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE
The *novela* in Figure 1 demonstrates the kinds of localized information that families requested; they also demonstrate a culturally and linguistically responsive method to inform families and reinforce home learning. For example, the *Consejos novela* depicts two women in a grocery store, one of whom confides in her friend that she lacks confidence in helping her daughter with homework. The story continues when the second woman reveals her story of how she helped her children at home and offers suggestions for the first woman. The *novela* offers a solution -- establishing a quiet space and allocated time for homework each night.

The pictures for *Consejos* were taken in the local community for this *fotonovela*, and the language was written and subsequently checked by native Mexican speakers. We created this *fotonovela* as a response to the interviews conducted with mothers in the community as well as the specific desire, by educators, to have parents support child learning in home at night, as noted above. We conceptualized this *fotonovela* as a team of educators and we ensured that the suggestions offered to parents in the *fotonovela* could be implemented within the local community. We created a glossary of key words on the back page to provide initial translation of key terms. Finally, when it was disseminated, we provided one-on-one information to parents and checked to see if they had questions about the information.

Creating the *fotonovela* meant working with multiple contributors, including bilingual and biliterate students from the university and members of a local church, who posed for the pictures and checked the language for regional variation and orthography. Some of the information in the *fotonovelas* was adapted from key websites that immigrant families lacked access to, namely the Rural Women’s Health Project (RWHP,
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2014) and Colorín Colorado (2014). One example was a fotonovela on La Conferencia, which described the purpose of the parent-teacher conference and what families could expect.

In order to address the concerns of teachers and their need to communicate with families, we provided copies of the fotonovelas to the teachers and explained how they could be used with families and how to disseminate them. Teachers were especially interested in a novela titled Como Lo Leo, or How to Read It [the report card], because of the district’s complicated grading system and their concern, as noted on the survey, for student learning in the classroom. They wanted reassurance that parents understood the grading system and their individual student’s grades. To create that novela, we used an actual report card with the student’s name deleted and translated it from English into Spanish directly on the back page of the novela, again providing key words in English for parents.

Another material item that captured local, community resources was created for both families and for teachers in the schools. In this work, we adapted a Guide/Guía with local resources that included heath care information, transportation, dental care, library information, and so on. The Guía was created as a bilingual, local resource for immigrant Latinos and for school personnel and followed an earlier, outdated model but adapted to the local county. Information in the Guía was verified via telephone and updated to ensure that bilingual staff could answer the calls of Spanish-speakers. The process of creating the Guía occurred over six-month period. We disseminated the Guía at school events and made copies available to individual schools and teachers for distribution.
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Our findings from this study and the third research question in particular demonstrated ways that parents’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds could be used to build a partnership with schools. In particular, the parents’ prioritizing their children’s education, providing a strong family base, and using social networking skills were discovered, affirmed, and enhanced. One way that this occurred was through the development and dissemination of *fotonovelas*. Using these *novelas* with both parents and teachers provided, then, teachers with knowledge of communication practices with immigrant Latino families in this rural community. Further, the most specific *novela*, the report card from the upper elementary school, was specific to that community. It is likely that the needs of this community differ from those of other communities; hence, we have found that each community’s needs and resources must discovered and built upon to support partnership-building efforts.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Our study found that building home-school partnerships in rural, new destination settings with immigrant Latinos requires a reconceptualization of both relationships and resources. The first steps in establishing relationships and building trust with immigrant Latinos in this rural setting required learning about their needs and experiences (discovering), and then affirming the strengths of individuals and groups (families, communities). Those steps were crucial to laying the foundation for a home-school partnership. We built our work upon teachers’ perceived needs related to working with immigrant Latino children (namely, understanding how best to communicate with families) and identified similar needs among families. The intersection of those findings led to professional development for teachers and material resources for teachers and
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families. In addition, data from this study underscore the importance of establishing ongoing communication networks (that is, broader and more fortified links) between families and schools and identifying creative ways to do so. As Valdés (1996) notes in her work, schools must do a better job of communicating with families but in ways that are non-threatening and respectful of families’ cultural backgrounds. This effort also required being present at after-school events and other, out-of-school venues to meet with the families in spaces where they can be physically present. In this study, we had to re-imagine and adapt methods of conveying information to families who were socially- and geographically- isolated due to the rural lifestyle and challenges of transportation, cost, and time. This study showed that building partnerships with families was grounded on the relationships built with families, and those relationships needed to be ongoing and affirming.

Data from this study showed that educators had similar needs as those of the families in that each wanted to know more about the other and asked for specific strategies for communicating and building relationships. Given the context of this work in rural settings, we stressed the culturally-responsive forms of oral and written communication. Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) note with accuracy that partnership building is a slow and steady process but must address the needs of the local community and offer resources that reflect those within and around the community. As outsiders but also stakeholders in the community, we have initiated the process of building school-family partnerships to reflect the cultural and linguistic resources in the community.

Teachers and administrators recognized the need to provide parental English language support and to have paraprofessionals and teaching staff available to families
more frequently than one evening per week. In addition, collaboration among paraprofessionals in the district, university students, and school staff established mechanisms to create linguistically and culturally appropriate materials and to translate school documents into Spanish for parents. While this work has yet to address how families’ funds of knowledge could inform classroom practices in this community, we strongly believe that this initial stage of home-school communication practices lays a foundation for that to occur. Moreover, as Antuñez (2014) suggests, involving parents into professional development opportunities as participants and presenters may be an additional area to explore in the context of rural, immigrant Latino families.

Finally, findings from this work underscore the notions that (1) partnership-building is a localized, sometimes slow, but important part of education, professional development, and student learning; and (2) partnerships depend first upon open networks of communication and establishing relationships with families by valuing home language and cultural practices, essentially building upon families’ strengths. And as Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) note, we must advocate for a more encompassing paradigm of parent involvement that includes “the existing power of parents and families, and create[s] empowerment strategies where [parents and families] can use their skills and talents in diverse and culturally responsive modes” (p. 188). Through this study, we hope to underscore the essential work of educators (leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff) to collaborate with immigrant families, building relationships and resources that reflect families’ cultural and linguistic contributions to the school and community.
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References


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Consejos

¡Rosa! ¿Cómo estás?

¡Gracias, amiga! Era un momento muy especial; no lo esperábamos.

Oí que Lupita estuvo maravillosa – ¿es verdad que fue nombrada la mejor de su clase?

¡Bien, gracias! ¿Y tú, Laura? Escuché que Lupita se graduó del colegio este fin de semana. ¡Felicitaiciones!

Sí, sí, estamos muy orgullosos de ella. No ha sido tan fácil para ella hablar inglés. Todos nosotros teníamos que ayudarle.

Yo no, y mi esposo solo un poquito, pero lo más importante fue la atención que le hemos dado a los estudios de Lupita.

¿Qué? ¿Pero hablan inglés?

¡Al principio, no creí que pudiéramos ayudar a nuestros hijos tanto, pero ya ves como funcionó para nuestra Lupita!
Appendix A: Parent Interview Questions

Where are you from?
What is your job?
How many years did you attend school?
Was school important for you and your family in your country?
What is your opinion of the school system in your country?
Why did you come to the US?
How are things different here in the U.S. in comparison to your home country?
What do you like about the US?
What don’t you like about the US?
What do you like about [this community]?
How do you feel included in the school system?
How do you feel excluded in the school system?
What information or support does the school provide to you?
Do you communicate with the school? Do the teachers communicate with you?
What are your expectations for your children in school?
What are your expectations for your children’s lives in the future?
If you could receive some support from the community, what services would you like to receive? (e.g. tutoring for your children, time to spend with other people to talk to, meals or parties from your home country, information about the schools here, etc.)
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Appendix B: Online Teacher Survey Questions

What grade(s) do you currently teach?
What other grade(s) have you taught?
Where do you teach?
How many ESOL students do you currently have in your class (if known)?
How many Latino students do you currently have in your class (if known)?
How many immigrant students do you currently have in your class (if known)?
Have you completed the FL ESOL endorsement requirement?
If no, how many hours of the endorsement have you completed?

Please rate your interest in the following professional development topics

- creating an inclusive, welcoming classroom for ELLs
- immigrant families in the local community
- the role of religious organizations and outreach programs
- issues of immigration and immigration law
- building family-school-community partnerships
- communicating with ELLs’ families
- implementing effective instructional strategies for ELLs
- assessment accommodations for ELLs

Please tell us where you work with immigrant Latino children (e.g., in the classroom, after school programs, tutoring)

Please tell us about experiences you have had with immigrant Latino families outside of school (e.g., tutoring, home visits, community involvement, religious organizations)
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Please tell us about any experiences you have had traveling in Latin America

What kinds of community organizations would you be willing to work with in partnerships to support immigrant, Latino families?