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Abstract

This article describes how schools shape family engagement practices in the context of the New Latino Diaspora. Building on critical scholarship that has called for more culturally appropriate definitions of family engagement, this study seeks to develop a theoretical understanding of how school practices influence immigrant families' access to and participation in schools with little tradition of serving immigrant communities. Drawing on a statewide survey of practice in schools serving the New Latino Diaspora in Wisconsin, analysis includes descriptive statistics and textual analysis of survey comments from school principals and teachers working with immigrant students. Findings illustrate how considerable efforts to ensure access to Spanish-speaking families through interpretation and translation fall short of increasing family participation in key aspects of schooling. Given the influx of immigrants to new destinations across the United States, this work offers important insight into how schools receive newcomers in these contexts and identifies implications for research and practice.

Keywords

immigrant education, family engagement, demographic change, educational reform

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Introduction

Education scholars have long emphasized the importance of family engagement in public schools as a key feature of successful schooling, in terms of increased student achievement and well-being (Bussing, Gary, Koro-Ljungberg, & Wilder, 2011; Comer, 1984; Epstein, 2001), as well as strengthened relationships and resource sharing among various community members (Cohen-Vogal, Goldring, & Smrekar, 2010; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Schutz, 2006; Warren, Hoong, Leung Rubin, & Sychitkokhong Uy, 2009). The extent to which school practices support and promote family participation has been found to determine the degree of family engagement in schools (Cohen-Vogal et al., 2010; Epstein & Lee, 1995). At the same time, a growing body of critical research has shown that traditional definitions of family engagement in schools often fail to incorporate certain communities in meaningful and empowering ways, contributing instead to ongoing marginalization based on race, ethnicity, class, language, and immigrant status (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Chávez-Reyes, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Lopez, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Villenas, 2002). These scholars call for a reconceptualization of family engagement practices in schools, seeking culturally appropriate definitions of family engagement that grant agency to families in decisions about their children's education (Lopez, 2001; Villenas, 2002).

Given changing demographics in public school enrollment across the country, critical scholarship on family engagement offers an important lens through which to view the reception of immigrant communities in new immigrant destinations. Over the last few decades, immigration trends have led to a rapid increase in the public school enrollment of Latino students across the country, with the fastest proportional growth in states with little tradition of immigration (Marrow, 2005). These youth and their families have been characterized as a "New Latino Diaspora" (Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002). As opposed to traditional immigrant gateways such as Los Angeles and New York City, these new destinations have little recent history with immigration and in many cases, little experience with racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity (Singer, 2009). As such, schools in these contexts often lack access to bilingual resources that are more easily accessible in traditional gateway locations (Capps et al., 2005; Quiñones-Benitez, 2003; Wortham et al., 2002). In these new immigrant destinations, educators are being asked to reimagine their work as the responsibilities of schooling in these contexts shift. Furthermore, traditional notions of family engagement are increasingly challenged by the distinct characteristics of newcomer communities.

While an emerging body of literature has begun to characterize the experiences of newcomers in these new immigrant destinations, there remains much to learn about education in the context of this demographic change (Orfield, 2007; Waters & Jimenez, 2005). More specifically, there is a need to develop a theory for understanding how schools work to engage newcomers through their family engagement practices. Examining whether and how schools are redefining family engagement practices in this context, this descriptive study draws from a statewide survey of school practices in Wisconsin, one of 12 states experiencing more than 200% growth in their Hispanic population in the last 20 years (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). In this article, I develop a theory of family access to and participation in family engagement practices in the New Latino Diaspora. Using descriptive statistics and analysis of survey comments, I examine the ways in which considerable efforts to ensure access to Spanish-speaking families through interpretation and translation practices fall short of increasing family participation in key aspects of schooling.

Family Engagement Practices

There is no doubt that positive relations between home and school have consistently been found to be key elements of successful school practice (Comer, 1984; Epstein, 2001; Shutz, 2006). Scholars in the field have emphasized the importance of partnership, collaboration, and shared-decision making among schools, families, and communities (Comer, 1984; Epstein, 2001). In the development of meaningful connections between schools and the families they serve, schools “promote greater cooperation, commitment, and trust” (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2010, p. 58). Furthermore, family engagement has been found to relate to teacher expectations of student performance and student achievement, particularly in the context of at-risk communities (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2010). Schools are charged with the important task of developing practices to support positive home-school relations, practices that either promote or fail to promote meaningful partnerships with the families schools serve (Epstein, 2001).

In the context of immigration, family engagement in schools has been viewed as all the more critical (Carreón et al., 2005; Chávez-Reyes, 2010; Lopez, 2001). As Chávez-Reyes (2010) explains, “many children of immigrants come from home situations that necessitate resources and information to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap and to access social and economic capital to navigate U.S. schools” (p. 478). Given their marginalized status in society, the improvement of engagement practices for these families “has the potential to contribute not only to academic achievement but also to an alteration, over

time, of schools' core understandings of their role in promoting a more equal and more democratic society" (Shutz, 2006, p. 693). The ways in which schools engage these traditionally marginalized families, therefore, is seen as critical not only for individual students, but for the community as a whole.

Although building more meaningful partnerships between schools is widely accepted as an important element of school improvement efforts, there is little consensus about what exactly involvement (or engagement) should entail in terms of clearly specified school practice (Carreón et al., 2005). Traditionally, school efforts to engage families have followed a "bake sale" model, by which families engage in school practice primarily as supporters and observers (Warren et al., 2009). In this model, schools expect and promote participation in school-defined aspects of schooling, including parent-teacher conferences, parent organizations responsible primarily for fundraising, and volunteer opportunities at school events and within classrooms (Carreón et al., 2005). However, as I describe in detail in the next section, a growing body of research problematizes these normative practices of family engagement, suggesting that they fail to engage traditionally marginalized families in their children's education.

Critical Perspectives on Family Engagement

Several critics of traditional family engagement practices have found schools' efforts to partner with families to be superficial, ill-conceived, and inequitable. A critical body of research emphasizes the multiple ways in which school practices often lead to the marginalization of certain families based on race, ethnicity, class, language, and immigrant status (Chávez-Reyes, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Lopez, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). Although scholars of Latino education have long placed emphasis on the importance of the *funds of knowledge* that students bring with them from home (e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), few have found evidence of family engagement practices, which effectively incorporate Latino families in the process of schooling. Barriers to participation, including prohibitive work schedules, cultural norms of respect for educational institutions, different languages, and hesitance to participate in the public realm due to fears of hostile immigration policies, challenge school efforts to develop meaningful family engagement practices (Chávez-Reyes, 2010).

In the field of immigrant education, scholars have articulated three main critiques of family engagement practices. First, several have identified deeply held, deficit-oriented perspectives among educators as the cause of the failure of family engagement efforts. These scholars describe the role of

discrimination deriving from the belief held by administrators and educators that new Latino immigrants arrive in this country without preexisting knowledge to contribute, a perspective termed “deficit thinking” (Bartolomé, 1994; Menchaca, 1995; Valencia, 1997). Valencia (1997) explains that in a deficit-oriented belief system, low achievement of ethnic minorities is explained by “pathologies or deficits in their sociocultural background” (p. 3). In her foundational work on Latino family engagement, Valdés (1996) identified misunderstandings between families and schools caused by “expectations that teachers had about what families should be, how they should view education, and how they should behave” (Valdés, 1996, p. 148). This perspective leads educators, administrators, and policy-makers to focus on families’ shortcomings rather than examine the efficacy of their own policies and practices. In a deficit-oriented perspective, educators focus on how their work can solve the deficits of their ethnic minority students, rather than capitalize on their strengths.

Second, critics have identified ways in which monolithic, pre-specified definitions of families and participation facilitate a disconnect between home and school for immigrant youth. In his study of one immigrant family in a traditional gateway community, Lopez (2001) critiqued typical school practices, which define parental involvement narrowly. He called for schools to strive to *partner* with parents on their own terms. He explained that, “instead of trying to get marginalized parents involved in specific ways, schools should begin to identify the unique ways that marginalized parents are already involved in their children’s education, and search for creative ways to capitalize on these and other subjugated forms of involvement” (Lopez, 2001, p. 434). Carreón et al. (2005) called for greater focus on how immigrant families *author* engagement practices, both in practice and scholarship. They argue that researchers and practitioners alike should redirect focus not just on how families participate in preexisting school practices, but focus instead on the generative co-construction of school practices by families and the schools that serve them. Given these critiques, scholars have argued for more inclusive practices aimed at, “the empowerment of parents to be active in their children’s education with whatever means they possess as well as the empowerment of schools to assist families in activating and developing parents’ skills to enhance their children’s academic development” (Chavez-Reyes, 2010, p. 476).

Third, existing family engagement practices have been described as unequal partnerships in which schools dictate acceptable practice for families without giving families a true voice in decisions about their children’s education (Carreón et al., 2005; Shutz, 2006; Warren et al., 2009). To address the inequitable and unequal partnership between schools and families,

particularly in traditionally marginalized communities, Warren et al. (2009) argue that a theory of relational power might allow families and educators to, “look to their shared interest in advancing the education and well-being of children to help them work through inevitable differences and conflicts.” (p. 2213). They distinguish between “involvement” and “engagement,” defining “engagement” as practices which view parents as equal and active participants. Implicit in this critical body of work is the notion that immigrant families ought to be engaged in creating and defining the school practices for their children and that while this is true for some schools, engagement practices are generally not fulfilling that goal.

In the context of traditional immigrant destinations, family engagement practices, which promote deficit-oriented perspectives, monolithic interpretations of the needs of immigrant communities, and unequal power dynamics between schools and families have been found to hinder the process of immigrant acculturation and further marginalize newcomers most in need of school services (Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). In new immigrant destinations, the challenge of creating effective family engagement practices is likely amplified by a dearth of bilingual staff, as well as an unwillingness to redefine participation in terms appropriate to the changing demographics (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilés, 2005; Capps et al., 2005; Wainer, 2006). Recent work in the context of the New Latino Diaspora suggests that deficit perspectives among educators may drive the redesign of family engagement practices that seek to ameliorate perceived deficits, rather than partner with families to access the rich assets and culture these families bring to the community (Brunn, 2002; Hamann, 2003; Villenas, 2002).

For example, in her study of a school in rural Iowa, Brunn (2002) described parental involvement programs that attempted to, “provide an avenue for the parents to access the social and academic resources of their children’s school and of the local community” (p. 198). Purposefully offered before afternoon shift at the factory, classes focused on how to read to your child, how to get assistance with housing, and procedures for communicating with the school. Although well-intended initiatives, these programs sought to provide what parents were perceived as lacking. Analyzing a similar set of initiatives in a Georgia school district, Hamann (2003) explained that though these efforts demonstrated the sincere intentions of educators, they also betrayed the underlying deficit-oriented beliefs. He and others called for greater agency for Latino parents. Villenas (2002) advocated for schools to help Latino parents use their own expertise to shape their children’s education and to respect “their right to guide their children’s upbringing and to retain various traditional, coherent goals” (Villenas, 2002, p. 23). As Hamann (2003) so aptly

put it, “attempts to be more responsive to local Latinos still largely excluded local Latinos from shaping what that response would look like” (p. 92).

These studies provide a foundation for understanding how schools shape family engagement practices in the context of the New Latino Diaspora. This work contributes rich, ethnographic portraits of particular schools undergoing demographic change. In this article, I contribute cross-context analysis, looking across multiple school contexts to understand trends in family engagement practices. I consider how principals and teachers across the state of Wisconsin interpret and shape family engagement in the context of the New Latino Diaspora.

Research Questions

This exploratory study sets out to describe how schools serving the New Latino Diaspora approach issues of family engagement. As discussed above, prior research has emphasized (a) the need for clearer definitions of family engagement practice, and (b) the need for a critical examination of these practices in the context of traditionally marginalized communities. In the context of the New Latino Diaspora, how are schools adapting family engagement practices to meet the needs of newcomers? What do these practices tell us about how schools are working to integrate (or marginalize) growing immigrant communities?

Method

This article describes family involvement practice in emerging immigrant destinations as part of a larger research project focused on education in the New Latino Diaspora. The study was designed to offer insight into the influence of demographic change on multiple school contexts through a statewide survey of school practice. As such, the study takes a descriptive approach to survey methods in order to identify patterns in practice. In addition to a comparative analysis of differences across geographic locale and school level, the article also includes findings from a thematic coding of open-ended textboxes about family involvement. In the following sections, I first explain the state context for the study and the sample, and then describe data analysis.

Study Context and Sample

As an *emerging Hispanic state*, Wisconsin has experienced more than 200% growth in its Latino population since 1990 (Fry & Gonzales, 2008). Like other

Midwestern states, changes in the food processing and agricultural industries have led to a shift in Latino immigration to rural, suburban, and urban communities across Wisconsin in the 1990s (Marrow, 2005; Singer, 2008). As emerging immigrant destinations, these nontraditional gateways may have supported previous waves of immigrants or migrants, but are characterized by recent, unprecedented settlement and growth of immigrant communities (Singer, 2008).

Demographic change has created significant changes in public school enrollments in the state. Over the last decade, there has been significant growth in the number of Spanish-speaking English learners (ELs) in Wisconsin schools. Although overall numbers remain low, with the most current available data showing that Spanish-speakers make up 3.5% of total enrollment in the 2009 to 2010 school year, this percentage is nearly triple that in the 1998 to 1999 school year (1.4%). Furthermore, while the total percentage of ELs remains low in the state and these students make up a small minority of the total population, a much larger percentage of schools across the state serve this growing group, with 58% (1,354 schools) enrolling at least some Spanish-speaking ELs. In 1999, the majority of schools across the state (71%) did not enroll any Spanish-speaking ELs. These trends show that despite the minority status of Spanish-speaking ELs in Wisconsin's public schools, this is an increasingly relevant aspect of education in the state and impacts education in all types of schools.

Statewide surveys of educators in Wisconsin's New Latino Diaspora collected data on several school-level practices, including family engagement. Using a growth-rate of Spanish-speaking EL enrollments over the last decade, the study took an attempted census of principals and EL teachers in 384 schools across the state serving members of the New Latino Diaspora (Lowenhaupt & Camburn, 2011). Surveys were administered electronically in December, 2008 and January, 2009.

Data analyzed for this article focuses on results from 115 principal surveys (30% response rate) and 152 teacher surveys (40% response rate) from across the state. Despite a fairly low response rate, a sampling analysis was used to ensure minimal response bias (Groves et al., 2009; Solomon, 2001). Results from this analysis suggest that these surveys are representative of schools serving the New Latino Diaspora in Wisconsin, with similar distributions of schools to the target population of schools and to the state as a whole (Table 1). In general, the types of schools in which survey participants work were comparable to those serving members of the New Latino Diaspora and to those across the state and are therefore prone to minimal response bias. On average, educators responding to the survey worked in schools with greater

Table 1. School Characteristics of Survey Participants

Characteristic	% of schools in the state	% of 384 total sample	% of 115 principal responses	% of 152 teacher responses
Urban	22.2	36.7	31.3	40.4
Suburban	33.4	36.5	35.7	31.8
Rural	34.5	26.8	33.0	27.8
Elementary school	52.4	68.0	67.0	65.4
Middle school	15.6	19.5	21.7	19.0
High school	22.0	11.7	10.4	15.7

enrollments of Spanish-speaking ELs (on average, approximately 8%) as compared to the total sample of schools (approximately 6.5%). Despite this potential for response bias, I argue that findings reported here are generalizable to the Wisconsin state context and offer insight into the response to demographic shift in new immigrant destinations across the country.

Respondents included principals and teachers. Of 114 participating principals, the majority had been in their current positions for more than three years (57%), with a greater majority with total experience as a principal for longer than three years (74%). A small minority of principals (19%) reported that they were in the midst of their first year in their school at the time of completing the survey. Only 2% of the principals identified themselves as Latino, a disappointingly low number, although not surprising given the context of the study. Additionally, Spanish proficiency among responding principals was low. Only 6% reported that they were proficient or fluent in Spanish. While a large minority (48%) reported that they did have *basic* Spanish skills, 46% indicated that they spoke no Spanish.

Participating teachers were identified by school rosters and personal contacts as those educators charged with supporting growing populations of ELs, although their official position title varied (Table 2).

Similar to principal participants, the majority of teacher respondents (56%) had taught in their schools for more than three years and a greater majority (82%) had taught for more than three years total. As compared to the principal participants, teacher participants were more likely to reflect the demographic they served. Of 150 responses, 38 teachers (10%) identified as Latino. There were 26 teachers (17%) who reported that they spoke no Spanish; the rest ranged from basic to fluent, with 38 (10%) who reported fluency. As evident from the description of survey respondents, participants in the study ranged in their experience and capacity to respond to rapidly shifting demographics in their schools.

Table 2. Official Titles of Teacher Participants

Official teaching role	Number	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
ELL teacher	57	41	41
ESL teacher	42	30	71
Bilingual teacher	23	16	87
Title I/reading	6	4	91
Classroom teacher	5	4	95
Learning coordinator/coach	4	3	98
Aide	3	2	100

Data Analysis

Results presented here are based on descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, as well as textual analysis of open-ended textboxes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In considering both quantitative and qualitative aspects of survey results, I followed a process of “parallel mixed data analysis” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). After initial, separate analyses of items on both the principal and teacher surveys, I conducted textual analysis of a series of open-ended comments. I then triangulated findings across the two methods to identify consistencies and exceptions. This iterative and integrated process allowed the two forms of data to speak to each other and provided textual evidence in support of quantitative findings.

Specifically, this article focuses on responses to survey items related to family engagement practices. Principals were asked to characterize a series of school practices traditionally associated with immigrant family engagement (Lopez, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2002). They were also given an opportunity to describe additional services offered to Spanish-speaking families in an open-ended textbox. Teachers were asked a series of items comparing the participation of Spanish-speaking families to other families in the schools. Similarly, the items incorporated traditional forms of family engagement with an additional opportunity to expand on these practices in an open-ended textbox. Analyses of Likert-type scale items included descriptive and inferential statistics, in addition to exploratory factor analysis. After testing the internal consistency, or reliability, of multiple items using Chronbach’s alpha, exploratory factor analysis was used to construct aggregate indices serving as index measures characterizing family engagement on both the principal and teacher surveys (Groves et al., 2009). Results from inferential statistical analyses, including *t*-tests,

Table 3. Open-Ended Textboxes

Comment	Data source	Description	Number of comments	Percentage of responses
Services for families	Principal	Additional services for Spanish-speakers and their families	10	9
General principal	Principal	Additional experiences working with Spanish-speakers	18	16
Family participation	Teacher	Additional ways in which Spanish-speaking families have participated in school	49	32
General teacher	Teacher	Additional experiences working with Spanish-speakers	64	42

analysis of variance, and correlations, explained some variation in these measures of family engagement according to a series of school context factors, such as school level, locale, and rate of growth in Spanish-speaking enrollment.

I used Nvivo qualitative analysis software for open-coding of comments related to family engagement in an iterative coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After a preliminary analysis of quantitative findings, I took an initial pass through these textual data, creating codes related to the forms of family engagement described in a series of comments from both principal and teacher surveys (see Table 3). This process allowed me to expand and develop analysis of survey items. Once I completed a more detailed quantitative analysis of survey data, I revisited the textual data. Recognizing the need to be flexible, I was not wed to my initial set of codes, but rather added to my coding structure as I went (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this second pass through the comments, I sought a more complex understanding of patterns of note in the quantitative data. After finalizing quantitative analysis, I then conducted a third analysis of qualitative data, which allowed me to identify comments, which exemplified findings from the quantitative data.

The analysis of survey comments allowed for a more nuanced understanding of both measured and unmeasured aspects of family engagement practices. In addition to offering insight into traditional forms of family engagement as measured through survey items, the comments gave voice to other forms of family engagement viewed as important to school practice by those working in them. Findings from these analyses are discussed in the findings section below.

Results

In this section, I share findings from the study as they relate to two aspects of family engagement. First, I discuss schoolwide efforts to ensure *access* to existing practices through interpretation and translation as reported by principals. Second, I consider immigrant family *participation* in a variety of school practices, discussing both traditional forms of participation as well as efforts to expand definitions of family engagement to incorporate newcomers more effectively.

Principal Perspectives: Access

On the principal survey, a series of questions about the frequency of translation and interpretation of various school processes into Spanish measured *access* to existing practices for new immigrant families. Principals were asked to respond on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from “never” to “always”.¹ In Table 4, I summarize the mean responses for each item. The modal response for all items except for the last item regarding interpreters at schoolwide meetings was “always.” While a few principals reported that they never offer these forms of access to families, the majority for all six items indicated that these supports were more than regularly practiced, with the exception of the presence of Spanish interpreters at schoolwide meetings. As apparent by the mean responses for each item, most schools employ these practices most of the time. In general, these responses are higher than one might expect. The notable difference in responses for the last item listed, the use of Spanish interpreters at schoolwide meetings, does suggest that while many schools emphasize access in direct communication with Spanish-speaking families, the overall adaptation of daily practices not explicitly relevant to Spanish-speaking families may be less common. Even so, the

Table 4. Mean Response for Family Access Items

Item	Mean
Spanish interpreters are present at parent–teacher conferences.	4.2
Registration forms are available in Spanish.	4.0
Spanish interpreters are available to take phone calls.	3.6
Letters sent home are translated into Spanish.	3.5
Grade reports are translated into Spanish.	3.4
Spanish interpreters are present at schoolwide meetings.	3.1

overall means for these items indicate the prevalence of practices aimed at building access for families in the New Latino Diaspora.

Taken together, responses across all six of these items were consistent with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.862$). Aggregated, they create a generalized measure of *access* to basic school functions through Spanish language. As such, a low aggregated mean of these items describes a school, which has not developed this form of access for Spanish-speaking families. A high rating on this index depicts a school, which has actively created multiple access points for these families, ensuring their ability to understand and engage with school practices. The mean response of 3.6 indicates that in general, schools were rated as incorporating these forms of access somewhere between “often” and “regularly.” Principals generally rated their schools positively, with only a few principals rating their schools lower than 2 on this scale. This may be representative of inflated administrator responses, rather than a true degree of access, but it does highlight that ensuring access for Spanish-speaking families is considered important for principals in the context of the New Latino Diaspora.

Despite generally high ratings, this scale of access ranged from 0.7 to 5, indicating wide variation in the degree to which schools ensured access for immigrant families. Given this variation, I investigated the ways in which family access varied across different kinds of schools in the study (see Figure 1). Although school level and locale were not related to this measure, schools with more rapid and extreme growth in their Spanish-speaking enrollments did rate slightly higher on this scale, with a statistically significant difference ($p = .044$) between the mean of high growth schools ($M = 3.9$) compared to low growth schools ($M = 3.3$).

In other words, those schools with greater growth were more likely to focus on Spanish translation and interpretation. This is not surprising; as communities of Spanish-speakers grow, one would expect this form of access to become increasingly important within schools. One possible explanation for this might be the greater number of bilingual staff and teachers in higher growth schools, who might facilitate access for Spanish-speaking families (Lowenhaupt, 2010). Overall, an emphasis on creating access for families through the use of Spanish language appeared to be a fairly common response to shifting demographics. As a concrete, and in many ways manageable practice, this does seem like a logical starting point for many schools undergoing demographic change. However, *access* alone is not a sufficient measure of family engagement in schools. Below, I discuss findings from the teacher survey related to a measure of *participation* as another dimension of family engagement.

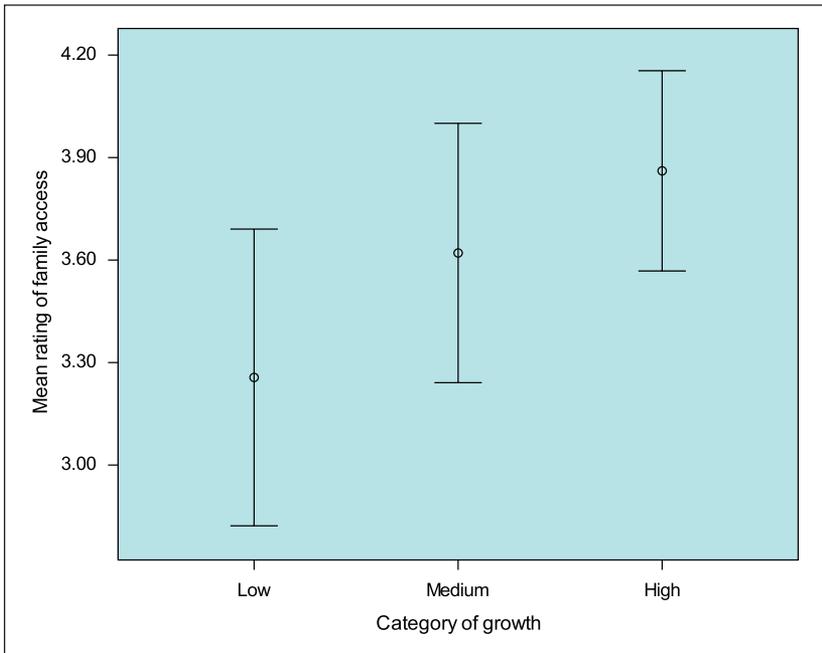


Figure 1. Mean differences in family access by growth rate (with 95% CI)

Teacher Perspectives: Participation

In considering family engagement, one can think of *participation* as an outcome of school practices, which encourage engagement. At the same time, it is important to be aware that participation as defined may normalize particular forms of participation, while ignoring others. Here, I begin with an analysis of traditional forms of participation, such as attendance at parent–teacher conferences and school events. On the teacher survey, teachers were asked to compare the involvement of Spanish-speaking families to the involvement of other families identify whether or not schools in the study have fostered immigrant participation in activities traditionally identified as valuable forms of participation. It is important to acknowledge that differing cultural norms of participation may lead to other, equally valid forms of family involvement (Lopez, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Villenas, 2002). Recognizing that equitable participation may not mean equal participation, I take as a starting point the degree of participation in traditional forms of family involvement, before discussing other forms of participa-

Table 5. Mean Response for Family Participation Items

Item	Mean
Spanish-speaking families attended parent–teacher conferences when invited.	2.8
Spanish-speaking families requested personal communication with teachers.	1.8
Spanish-speaking families attended school events such as athletics or performances.	1.7
Spanish-speaking families participated in the PTA or other parent organizations.	0.7

tion as they relate to the adaptation of family involvement strategies to support the social integration of newcomers.

In the EL teacher survey, I asked a series of questions intentionally designed to describe normative aspects of family involvement in order to gain a general understanding of whether or not families are socially integrated in these existing practices. Inspired by the notion of “equity audits” (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004), these items serve as a measure of relative participation in an effort to compare the participation of Spanish-speaking families to other families in their school. Table 5 lists those items and each item’s mean response on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from, “none” to “all” and defined in comparison to the average participation of non-Spanish speaking families.² As such, a response of “2” would indicate average participation compared to other families in the school.

The mean participation in parent–teacher conferences was higher than reports of other forms of participation, with a mean response close to “more than average.” In fact, the modal response on this item was “nearly all,” highlighting a high degree of participation in parent–teacher conferences. This high level of participation in conferences is likely a direct result of the strong emphasis on creating access for Spanish-speaking families through interpreters at conferences as found in results on the principal survey. In general, however, mean responses indicated that participation in other activities was lower than “average,” suggesting that Spanish-speaking families were less likely than others to participate in these forms of involvement. On these other items, the modal responses were “fewer than average.”

Ranked notably low was an item on the teacher survey measuring participation in parent–teacher organizations, a form of involvement, which requires active participation. Other forms of involvement discussed measured

participation in terms of attendance. Participation in organizations such as the PTA requires more than attendance and signals active involvement in guiding and leading the school. Lower reports on this survey item are in line with prior research about the New Latino Diaspora. This suggests that efforts to socially integrate these families stop short of granting them political voice and agency in their children's education (Villenas, 2002). According to the teacher survey, participation in terms of parent leadership at the school level was more limited than other forms of participation.

Despite differences among items, patterns of response held together as a relative measure of *participation* with fairly high internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.701$). Although removing the item measuring participation in parent-teacher organizations increased the reliability of the scale slightly ($\alpha = 0.731$), I included it in the index of participation due to its importance as a key form of involvement. As a mean index of relative participation, a high overall rating represents a school where immigrant families participate as much or more than other families. The schools have developed family engagement practices, which are inclusive of Spanish speakers. Conversely, schools with low ratings on this scale have not been successful at designing practices, which include Spanish-speaking families to the same degree that other families feel comfortable participating. The mean rating on this index was 1.75, just below "average." While no one ranked all four items as 5, ratings on this index ranged widely from 0.25 to 4 with a clear peak to the distribution at 1, or "fewer than average." As such, the majority of participants rated overall participation of Spanish-speaking families as below average.

Given the importance of school practice in supporting family participation, I hypothesized that school context characteristics would lend themselves to differing degrees of participation. However, analyses found that growth rate and school locale were not associated with this index of family participation. While one might hope that as the community of Spanish-speakers grows, schools would more proactively support participation, growth rate and family participation that were not correlated. However, differences by school type were statistically significant for this measure, with differences between elementary and high school strongly significant ($p = .000$). As illustrated in Figure 2, elementary schools ($M = 1.9$) were rated significantly higher on this scale of family participation than high schools ($M = 1.3$).

Although all schools reported a similar emphasis on ensuring access for families, reports of participation were lower in the high schools. Although developmental differences in the students they serve may account for some of this difference, I would argue that at least in part, school practices at the elementary level have led to higher degrees of family participation, with more effective efforts to engage families likely occurring at this level.

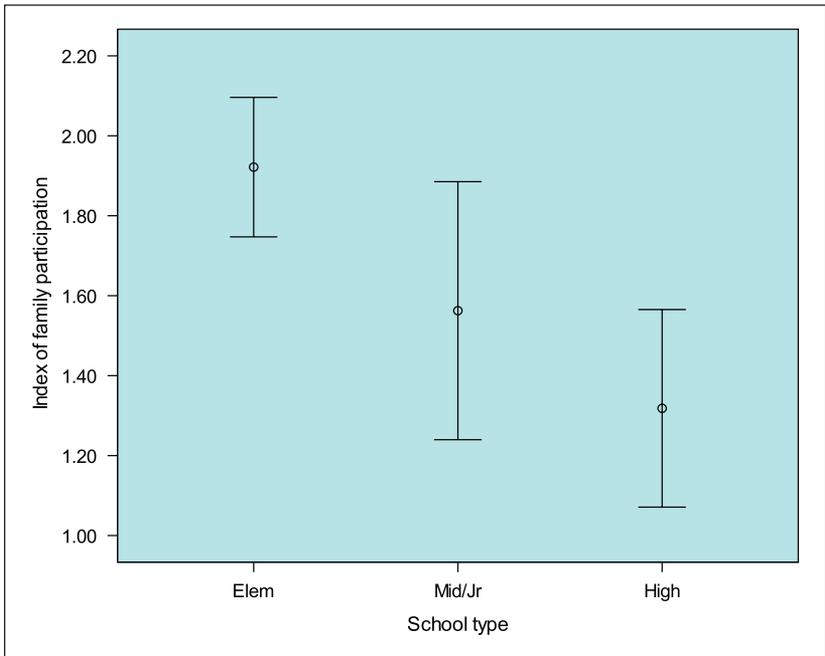


Figure 2. Mean measures of family participation by school type (with 95% CI)

Further explanation of the variation in the participation of immigrant families can be found in a deeper understanding of the extent to which schools reach out to families and actively encourage engagement. While a deficit-oriented perspective might attribute low immigrant family participation to families’ disinterest in these aspects of school, I interpret levels of engagement as indicative of school efforts to provide access and welcome families at these activities. Several remarks provided evidence to support this interpretation in comments about their successful efforts to increase participation in particular ways. An EL teacher explained, “In order to increase parent attendance at conferences a bilingual staff member calls the parents to set up the time and follows through with a phone call the day before their meeting. Translators are available at the door to meet the parents and take them to the room. This has increased parent attendance by 80%.” In this example and approximately ten others, participants provided specific examples of how efforts to incorporate families have led to more involvement. As one teacher summarized, “I feel the more we try, the more our families will feel welcome!!!” These comments highlighted the connections between access and

participation, outreach and involvement, and offered a counter-argument to frequent misperceptions that Latino families are not invested in their children's education (Lopez, 2001; Valdés, 1996).

Both measures of family access and participation discussed above illustrate aspects of family engagement in schools serving members of the New Latino Diaspora. As defined, they describe practices of family involvement already in place in the schools and highlight the degree to which Spanish-speaking families have access to and participate in existing school practices. Overall, these schools appeared to foreground issues of *access* for families, with high reports of interpretation and translation. However, measures of *participation* were fairly low, suggesting that despite these efforts to ensure access, immigrant families were not generally actively involved in traditional forms of engagement. In the next section, I discuss the ways in which some schools have redefined family engagement in the context of demographic shift and reflect on the implications of these changing definitions of engagement.

Evolving Definitions of Family Engagement

While the survey items discussed above measured normative forms of family engagement, evidence from survey comments suggest that many schools are seeking to establish alternate forms of engagement and create new ways to include Spanish-speaking families. Although some of the practices depicted below may seem inconsequential, the symbolic meaning of these efforts signals a shift in some schools toward redefining engagement in terms of the needs of immigrant families, rather than the needs of the school.

Issues of access emerged as a key concern in the majority of comments, with an emphasis on the importance of outreach to ensure access for Spanish-speakers. Nearly all of the participants who commented on engagement highlighted the importance of personal, direct communication as a method of ensuring accessibility for Spanish-speaking families. There were several principals who identified EL teachers as central in opening lines of communication, and many EL teachers who described their efforts to connect personally by phone and in person through home visits. Others highlighted the importance of having a Spanish-speaker readily available to interpret when families entered the building. Additionally, some described specific forms of written communication in Spanish. For example, one teacher explained that in order to ensure access, her school created, "a weekly bulletin that goes home just to Spanish speaking families." The use of technology facilitated

direct access in some cases. Three teachers mentioned the use of simultaneous translation equipment, which allowed Spanish-speakers to participate in real time in schoolwide meetings. Others described the use of automated Spanish attendance messages and voicemail to ensure that families could communicate easily with the school. In all of these comments, educators emphasized that their efforts to reach out to families through accessible and personal communication in Spanish supported greater family engagement.

As evident in survey comments, some schools redefined participation for Spanish-speaking families by focusing on identifying and meeting particular needs of this community. Several highlighted the development of adult English language classes at the school. Others described special events at the school designed to provide answers to particular questions and concerns for Spanish-speaking families. As one teacher explained, "We will be initiating evening sessions to substantiate a positive inviting atmosphere within our school for our Latino population (families and students)." According to reports, most of these efforts to establish specialized programs have led to increased involvement of Latino families. As one teacher put it, "They do tend to participate when there are programs designed just for them . . . Many do come to school to have questions answered or to have something explained. Many families count on the schools as a kind of safety net. If they don't know where to turn, they turn to the schools." These efforts to reach out to families in new ways illustrate the shift away from traditional forms of family engagement practices in favor of those targeted to serve the particular needs of recent immigrants.

In some schools, educators identified new strategies to ensure access and redefined participation in terms of the perceived needs of immigrant communities. A critical analysis of these new forms of engagement begs the question of whether and how these forms of involvement empowered Latino families as equal participants in the design of schooling for their children. As other scholars have noted, well-intentioned efforts to offer support for perceived needs of newcomers often excluded them from decisions about the design of support (Hamann, 2003; Villenas, 2002). Some new forms of engagement came from a deficit-oriented perspective intended to solve the problems of newcomers, rather than capitalize on their cultural assets or encourage families to take an active role in defining their participation and shaping school practices. Even so, survey comments offered some evidence of efforts to shape engagement practices in response to shifting demographics. While these efforts were not reported by the majority of survey participants, they offer insight into how schools might work to create new forms of family engagement to effectively incorporate newcomers.

Discussion

The findings discussed above illustrate how conceptualizations of family engagement have been somewhat influenced by changing demographics. In the context of Wisconsin's New Latino Diaspora, schools have foregrounded issues of access for Spanish-speaking families, primarily implementing the use of Spanish interpreters at parent–teacher conferences and translating key school documents such as enrollment forms and grade reports. Those schools with higher populations and more rapid growth in their Spanish-speaking enrollments were more likely to offer families these forms of Spanish language access. Despite these efforts, findings showed that immigrant families' participation in traditional forms of family engagement was rare, perhaps due to a focus on providing newcomers with the opportunity to engage in current practices instead of redefining those practices to reflect changing demographics. While there was some evidence of innovation in engagement practices, such as offering English language classes and separate meetings for Spanish speakers, these efforts seem at best well-intentioned efforts to respond to the perceived needs of newcomers and at worst, indicative of a deficit-based approach to resolving issues raised by immigration. In some schools, educators emphasized the importance of personal communication in supporting access and encouraging participation. Notably, results from the study suggested the need for more engagement practices focused on ensuring immigrant families agency in determining their own needs or participating in meaningful ways in the design of engagement practices, as well as the educational experiences of their children. Below, I discuss limitations and directions for future work, and then consider the implications of these findings for practice.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The study discussed here employs survey methodology to examine patterns in school practices across multiple school contexts. In general, survey research is limited by the structure of the instruments and the perspectives of the respondents, and appropriate precautions were taken to minimize measurement error in the design and analysis of survey items (Groves et al., 2009; Sudman & Bradburn, 1982). This work focused on traditional definitions of family engagement, as measured by the degree to which immigrant families were given access to and participated in existing school practices. While survey comments illustrated some innovative family engagement practices, future work would benefit from greater focus on alternative forms of

engagement. Analysis of survey comments might be viewed as pilot work in the service of the design of survey items to measure innovative practices more systematically and to offer an important counterpoint to the normative practices measured by the engagement survey items analyzed here. For example, textual analysis indicated that personal forms of outreach such as phone calls and home visits were an important engagement practice in several schools. Future survey instruments might develop a series of items to measure the degree to which schools engage in these forms of outreach.

In addition, it is important to note that this analysis of family engagement was not based on the perspectives of families, who may or may not feel that particular forms of access and participation are valid, important ways to incorporate them into the school. This discussion would benefit from further investigation of this topic from the viewpoint of these families, rather than the perspectives of principals and teachers in the schools that serve them. Overall, findings from this study offered promising evidence of efforts to increase the involvement of members of the New Latino Diaspora in core aspects of schooling. However, the degree to which the design of these opportunities was determined by organizations rather than the individuals they serve is problematic. Future research might better identify the ways in which these individuals participate in the design of engagement practices by including those families as study participants.

Implications for Practice

Results from this study offer insight across contexts into family engagement practices, whereas previous research for the most part considers these practices within particular school contexts. As such, a few key findings offer important suggestions for educators designing family engagement practices. First, engagement in terms of participation in existing practices was significantly lower in high schools than elementary schools, despite similar reports of efforts to ensure families access across school levels. This suggests that traditional forms of participation are not working for families of adolescent immigrants, and that high schools need to focus additional energy on identifying new and meaningful ways to involve these families.

Second, personal communication and outreach was found to improve family engagement considerably. While this is not surprising given previous work which has identified immigrant (and undocumented) communities' lack of trust in institutions as a barrier to engagement (Carreón et al., 2005; Wainer, 2006), it suggests that traditional forms of family engagement may fall short in so far as those practices encourage families to engage with schools, rather

than schools to engage with families. In the context of the New Latino Diaspora, schools might shift their role in family engagement such that they foster efforts to build relationships through communication and outreach, rather than focus on access to families expected to initiate relations with a school. To facilitate this shift, schools might engage members of the community in those outreach efforts, using community to build community. Additionally, prior research on the role of bilingual teachers in communication and outreach has shown that strong bilingual staff can support this process (Hopkins, 2011). Support and development for bilingual teachers could be used to encourage more consistent and connected communication and outreach to recent immigrant families.

Third, participation was found to be particularly low in those school activities most likely to promote active participation among immigrant families. However, I would argue that schools with rapidly changing demographics have the most to gain from fostering more active engagement and agency, as they seek successful responses to demographic shift. A focus on practices, which solicit the partnership, advice, and input from immigrant families might offer insight into how best to serve them. While this seems a tall order given the limitations of traditional definitions of family engagement, demographic change may in fact offer the motivation for rethinking how best to incorporate all families in the design and structure of schooling.

In new immigrant destinations, schools have a remarkable opportunity to reevaluate the ways in which they privilege particular forms of engagement in ways, which marginalize some families, rather than adapting practices to encourage more active partnerships among families, schools, and communities. While efforts to ensure access to families are well-intentioned and an important first step in the context of the New Latino Diaspora, increased participation and true engagement will only occur with a redefinition of the very practices to which families are granted access. In other words, access to existing practice will not signal true family engagement until existing practices shift to include those aimed at connecting and including all families in a more meaningful way. Normative modes of engagement are not always accessible or of interest to immigrant families. In the context of the New Latino Diaspora, schools may need to reframe definitions of family engagement to support more meaningful engagement, grant agency to families in determining the education of their children, and improve schools to better serve all kids.

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Notes

1. The scale was defined as follows: 0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*, 4 = *regularly*, and 5 = *always*.
2. The scale was defined as follows: 0 = *none*, 1 = *fewer than average*, 2 = *average*, 3 = *more than average*, 4 = *nearly all*, and 5 = *all*.

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Bio

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